NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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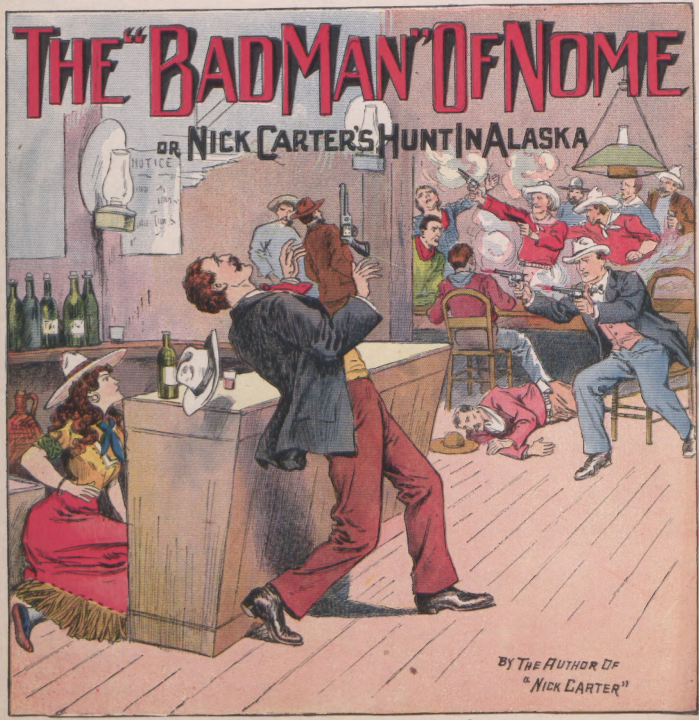
THE "BAD MAN" OF NOME

OR NICK CARTER'S HUNT IN ALASKA



BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

Nick Carter's two hands shot out, his two revolvers were discharged at the same instant, and the pistol in the hand of the gambler flew into the air, knocked away by one of the bullets from Nick's pistols.

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The "Bad Man" of Nome;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S HUNT IN ALASKA.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

NICK CARTER'S OLD-TIME FRIEND.

The starboard bridge and stairway were lowered into place and made fast, and Nick Carter, closely followed by Peyton Boynton, the New York banker, descended and entered a small boat with whose owner they had bargained to be set ashore at once.

"Nome, Alaska!" said Nick, laughing, as he seated himself on the after thwart with his face toward the shore. "I really never thought to see this place again, Boynton."

"And I certainly never supposed that I would be *forced* to come here," returned Boynton. "I always had the utmost faith in Jacob Hawkins, until you exposed him so cleverly."

Nick Carter nodded.

"I expect that we will discover a greater exposition of his methods, while we are here in this country, than we ever dreamed of, Boynton," he said.

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it; and in the case of Braxton Moore, his pal, as well, eh?"

"Sure. There was a time when I believed that Moore had been led astray by Hawkins, but on my word, before I was through with that bank-draft case, and particularly at the close of it, I began to think that the shoe was on the other foot." *

"It was about six of one and half a dozen of the other," said Boynton, with a sigh. "It was too bad, too."

The detective laughed aloud.

"One would suppose to hear you that you had entirely forgiven the pair of them, and that you might be disposed later to give them a share in whatever you save out of the wreck up here—if you save anything at all," he said.

But Boynton shook his head.

"Scarcely that," he said. "I cannot quite forget, even if I do forgive."

By which conversation it will be seen that Nick Carter had traveled to Nome, Alaska, with his client, Peyton Boynton, who was the president of the Bank of the

*No. 495 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, "The Klondike Bank Puzzle."

Klondike, situated in the city of New York, and named the Klondike for the reason that Boynton's interests were largely tied up in that far Northern place.

And those interests, until very lately, had been engineered by his friend and costockholder in the bank, one Jacob Hawkins; and this Jacob Hawkins and his pal, Braxton Moore, had shown themselves to be anything but honest. They had not only succeeded in cashing a false draft on Boynton's bank for more than two hundred thousand dollars, but later they had attempted to loot the bank as well—and only for Nick Carter they would have succeeded.

And then, later, when all that was done and past, Peyton Boynton had gone to Nick Carter's office one evening, and said to him:

"Carter, I want you to go to Alaska with me."

"Alaska? Nay, nay," the detective had replied; but Boynton had persisted as follows:

"You know that I have got about half of all I am worth tied up in that place. You know that it has been in the charge of Hawkins ever since I made the investment. You know what Hawkins has turned out to be, and, in short, you know the whole story as well as I do."

"Well, what of that?"

"I want you to go up there with me and help straighten things out."

"I don't see how it can be done, Boynton. I don't see how I can get away for the length of time that such a trip will require."

"There is only one way to get away."

"Yes?" Nick had said, smiling. "What is that?"

"Just to pack your grip and go away. That is the method I intend to pursue. I am going ostensibly to California; really, I am going to Alaska and the Klondike."

"What do you expect to accomplish when you get there. Eh?"

"I don't know that until I do get there. If I did, possibly I wouldn't have to go."

"Do you expect to save much out of your investments there?"

"I don't know. I wish I did; but I am going there to find out—and I want you to go with me."

"I'll let you know within the week, Boynton."

"Within the week! Confound it, Carter, I want to start to-night."

"To-night?"

"Yes"—he had glanced at his watch—"in six hours from now. Look here, Carter, your assistant, Chick, can attend to your affairs while you are away just as well as you could do it yourself. I have heard you say that of him a dozen times or more."

"I will admit that that part of it is quite true, Boynton."

"Then there isn't a thing on earth to prevent you from taking this trip with me. Besides, old man, it will do you untold good. You need the change and the rest that you will have on the trip there. I'll bring you back a new man."

And so Nick Carter had been prevailed upon to consent to make the trip; and thus it is that we find him, this particularly bright and beautiful morning, going over the side of the vessel into a small boat from the shore, and seating himself on the after thwart.

Thus it is that we find these two men in Nome together.

Having paid the boatman his stipulated fee of ten dollars for setting them ashore, and having added a substantial bonus to it on condition that he would carry their big Gladstone bags to the Northern Lights Hotel, they strolled into the town in his wake, looking eagerly about them as they went, and taking in everything they saw, with interest.

Nobody paid the slightest attention to them.

You might be in Nome a year, or you might have just arrived, like our friends—it is all one to the men who are already there. Each one has interests of his own and possibly troubles of his own, too, and he cares not a whit who you are, or where you came from—unless it happens that your business brings you into contact with him.

And yet it so happened that the pair were not more than half-way to the hotel when the detective encountered a man whom he knew well, and who recognized him at once.

"Mike Cregan!" exclaimed Nick, as the big Irishman stopped stock-still in front of him, and with a broad grin on his florid, good-natured, and withal good-looking, face, extended a horny hand which, in size, made one think of an elephant's ear.

"Faith, Mr. Carter, it's good f'r sore eyes to see you, so it is. Sure I haven't had so much rale pleasure since I came here as I'm after feelin' this minit. And by the rock o' Cashel y' haven't changed a bit, have ye?"

"No, Mike. I'm just the same old two-and-six."

"Sure. And who's y'r friend, Mr. Carter?"

"Let me introduce you. Shake hands with Mr. Boynton, Mike. Boynton, this is Mike Cregan, a very good old friend of mine who served many years on the police force in New York, and who came to this country about—— How long ago was it, Mike?"

"It's goin' on three years now, sir."

"And you haven't been back to the States since?" asked Boynton.

"Divil a bit. Sure I've had no time."

"Have you done well, Mike? Have you made money here?"

"Well, sir, I'm not a poor man. I have a tidy bit of the coin stowed away in me stockin', to tide me over

a rainy day. Yes, sir, I have done well up here. I have no kick coming at all, at all."

"I am delighted to hear that. You always had the right stuff in you, Mike."

"And I'm not forgettin', Mr. Carter, that ye staked me whin I started away f'r this place, so ye did."

"But you sent that back to me long ago, Mike. You have forgotten that part of it."

"Divil a bit have I; and it makes no difference here nor there, aither. Sure I'm glad I met ye whin I did, just now. Where were ye aimin' f'r?"

"The Northern Lights."

"Faith ye'll go to no Northern Lights, 'r to any other o' thim shacks they calls hotels. It's to me own house ye'll be after goin' and stayin' there, too. There, there! Don't ye say a word, sir. Sure, I've got a big and illigant house f'r these parts, so I have. And it's all alone in it I am, too. There's five rooms, and to save me life, Mr. Carter, I can't be in more than wan of thim at the same time, can I?"

"Hardly," replied Nick, laughing.

"Here, *you!* Siwash!" Cregan called out to the boatman with the bags. "Cart those things up to my house instead of to the hotel. Do you hear?"

"Fi' dolla' mo'," replied the half-breed imperturbably.

"Sure, ye'll git no fi' dolla' mo' from this outfit, Siwash; but all the same if ye don't git a move on ye and take thim things to my house at once, it's a broken head ye'll be after havin'. De ye mind that?"

Siwash Pete evidently did mind it, for he started on obediently, and without further argument.

"And now, Mr. Carter——"

"Mike," interrupted the detective, "you don't have very many misters up here, do you?"

"No, sir, not many of them. They are mostly Toms, and Dicks, and Harrys."

"That's what I thought. Well, I'm Nick. That's easier."

"Sure it is that, Nick. And what may your name be, sor?" he added, turning to Boynton.

"Both of my names are rather in the line of jawbreakers," replied the banker. "My first name is Peyton."

"Peyton, is it? Begorra, that comes pretty near to bein' Pat, so it does. I'll call ye Pat, if ye don't mind, whin we're around among the boys. It'll make ye feel more at home, and sure the bunch av thim will know that ye're under me protection. That manes something up here, too, for they don't any av thim like to run ag'in' me—an' by the same token ye look as if ye might have had some Irish ancistry about ye, some time."

"All right," said Boynton, laughing. "We'll be Mike, and Nick, and Pat, hereafter."

"Come along thin. I'll introjuce ye to y'r new home, and after that we'll look around us a bit. And say, Nick, that question I was going to ask ye whin ye interrupted me so suddint, was this: Have ye come up here to invest, 'r are ye just on a tour, 'r are ye in the pursuit av y'r profession?"

"Mr. Boynton—that is Pat, here—has some interests in these parts which he was obliged to look after, and he invited me to accompany him, so my presence is partly as a tourist and partly in a professional capacity," replied Nick.

They were walking toward Mike's home now.

"Maybe I can be of assistance to ye," said Mike, swinging into a long stride which made the others hustle to keep up with him.

"I am sure that you can, Mike," replied the detective.

"Thin maybe ye'll be after tellin' me what thim interests are, Nick."

"Some mining properties, of course. A collection of claims of which we have maps and charts with us. We will show you the whole thing a little later, after we have got settled down a bit."

Mike nodded.

"Sure," he said. "There's time enough."

"You may know something about the man who was here in Boynton's interests, Mike. His name is Jacob Hawkins."

Mike Cregan stopped still in the street and snorted.

"Hawkins, is it?" he said. "Sure I know about that spalpeen! And he had a pal named Moore! Faith, I know both av thim, and— Well, I don't know where they are now, but I know where they ought to be, and that's a place where it's hotter than it ever is in this town. Maybe ye know where I mane."

CHAPTER II.

THE "BAD MAN" OF NOME.

The Irishman took Nick and Boynton directly to the house he had mentioned, which was as pretentious in some respects as any place of residence in Nome. It was a building that at the most would have cost fifteen hundred dollars to erect in the States; but as Mike pointed to it with pride as they approached it, he said:

"Sure, Nick, I bought it f'r a song from a chap who suddenly found out that he had enough of the yellow stuff and decided to light out f'r home. It's only thirty-five thousand dollars I gave f'r it. I have two Chinamen there to wait on me and an old squaw man to do the outside worrk, and faith, I live like a prince, so I do."

"You should have a wife, Mike," said the detective.

"A wife is it?" Mike snorted again. "Not up here, sor. I'll wait. I've fixed my limit at two millions, and whin I git that, sure I'll hike back to little old New York, and thin if I can find a slip av a girrul who'll

have me, maybe I'll be after tyin' up f'r life—— But not till then; not on y'r tintype!"

"Are you getting up anywhere near to the two-million mark, Mike?" asked Nick.

"Oh, well, I dunno; maybe it's the half of it I have by me now; maybe it's a little more. I'm doin' well, Nick, so I am—but faith I'm gladder to see you than I would be to find the balance of the two, this minute!"

There was no mistaking his sincerity; and when they passed inside the house, he added:

"Sure, it's all yours, me fri'nds. And now, are ye hungry? That ship's fare is none too illigant, I'm think-in'."

"It was very good, Mike, and we had a hearty breakfast just before we came ashore."

"Then will ye be after sittin' down and havin' a chin, 'r shall we go out and nose around the town a bit?"

"We will do both. We will talk together a little and then we will go out and look around us. Are we keeping you from anything you wanted to do? Are we interfering with your plans for the day, Mike?"

"Divil a bit. I had no plans. If I had it would make no difference. You're me plans f'r the day, now."

"All right."

The detective took a box of cigars from his bag and placed it on the table.

"Straight from New York, Mike," he said. "Help yourself."

"Sure! And have ye a drop av Mr. Stewart's whisky about ye? Faith it's many a time I've left me post on the corner av Warren Street to walk down to Stewart's f'r a nip. Whist, now so ye have! Watch me!"

"What do you know about Jacob Hawkins, Mike?" asked Nick, after a pause.

"I don't know any good about him, 'r his pal, either. It was a pair of thim, and a bad pair to draw to at that. Thaves av the worrld, I called thim, and sure I wasn't far off."

"Do you know anything about the properties he was supposed to have, or to control?"

"Yes, I do, a little. He had some good ones, too, there's no denyin' that, though if ye're up here to git hold av thim it's a hard time ye'll be after havin', I'm thinkin'."

"Why?"

"Well, they've been jumped, most av thim, I'm think-in'. Hawkins wint away from here under a cloud, and there wasn't a soul here who thought that he'd ever dare to show his ugly face here again—and no more will he."

"Jumped?"

"Most av thim. Some av the others he pledged in order to get the dust to run away with. He had to go in secret, because if any of the boys had caught him in time they'd have made him look like a swan, they'd have stretched his neck that much."

"Boynton was half owner with him; in fact, he furnished *all* the cash for what Hawkins did up here."

"Is that so, Pat?" asked Mike. "Did you do that?"

"I certainly did," replied Boynton.

"Thin, in that case, and also f'r that reason, we'll have to be after seein' that ye have a square deal on the show-down—whin it comes. But if ye'll take a worrd av advice, ye'll lay kinder low f'r awhile until we three have looked the ground over and know where we're at."

"I think, Mike," said Nick, "that we will follow your advice in all things."

"You won't lose, if ye do that same. Sure, I haven't been here f'r nigh onto three years f'r nothin'."

He was silent a moment, and then he added:

"Ye'll have to stack up against a bad man, too. About the worst there is in this region."

"Who is that?" asked the detective.

"Jack Cracker is his name. Crack-a-Jack, 'r Cracker Jack he's called. He's a bad wan, too. Wan av thim cold-blooded divils that niver turns a hair no matter what happens; and with his gun always ready, and with an argument always ready, too, after he has used the gun—an argument to show that he had a perfect right to use it, and that he did it in silf-defense, and all that. He's a gambler."

"With a place of his own?" asked Nick.

"Sure. The finest in town. I'll take ye there to-night. Do ye iver play, Nick?"

"Not from choice; but I know how, if I have to do it."

"Well, I'd advise ye to take a flyer with Cracker to-night, just to establish y'silf with the boys who'll be lookin' on. And if ye could manage to win, all the bet-ter. They would respect ye rather more in that case. How is it with you, Pat?" he demanded of Boynton.

"Oh, I can play almost any game," was the smiling reply. "I've been around New York all my life, you know. I dealt faro all one summer at Saratoga, once when I was broke. That was when I was a good deal younger than I am now."

"Faith, Pat, ye'll do, I'm thinkin'. There's more in thim quiet eyes o' yourn than a feller sees at the first glance."

"What has this Jack Cracker got to do with the Hawkins' affair?" asked Nick, sticking to the subject.

"Well, Nick, to tell ye the truth, I don't know. Nobody knows, as a matter of fact. The two av thim were as thick as two peas in a pod, f'r a long time, and thin suddenly they broke away f'r wind, I'm thinkin'. Hawkins used to hang out at Cracker's all the time. He used to kape his papers and docymints in Cracker's safe, and he used to do a lot of other things in his place, too. There is nobody in the town who knows so much about

the inside of Hawkins' affairs as Cracker, and he's been keepin' daid still iver since the spalpeen wint away.

"More than that, it's me own opinion that it was actin' under his orders that the min were who jumped siven av the claims since Hawkins lit out, and I reckon if ye could look into the whole thing this night, just as it is, ye'd find that Cracker owns thim claims as were jumped—'r thinks he does, which is the same thing so far as Cracker is concerned."

"Has he a following?" asked Nick.

"Following, is it? Sure. A following of his own kind; of his own ilk—and they'd follow him to the divil and all if he asked them to. It's kind av a secret society they have, I'm thinkin'. I could niver git head nor tail to it—but maybe that's because I never tried; I've been too busy to bother with him."

"What kind of a society do you mean, Mike?"

"Well, if I had to give it a name, sure I'd call it the Sacret Order av Associated Crooks, 'r something like that. It would fill the bill. It's plunder they're after, and sure if Cracker can't git it over the green cloth, there are other ways."

"In plain English, you mean he is a thief."

"A thafe av the worrld! Sure!"

"And that he has other thieves associated with him?"

"A score av thim—'r more."

"And they make their headquarters at his place, do they?"

"Sure."

"What else do you know about him?"

"Faith, I'm thinkin' what I've said sizes him up all right, Nick."

"What is he?"

"Eh? A gambler I told ye."

"I mean is he Irish, or——"

"God forbid that he should be Irish! I dunno what he is. Just a cool, deliberate, cold-blooded, relentless blackleg and scoundrel who poses as a gintleman, and who can be so polite that butter wouldn't melt in his mouth; and who has the education av a collegiate, the manners av a prince, and the heart av a crocodile."

"And you think that he now has all these properties which, by right, belong to Boynton, in his possession?"

"I'm sure of it."

"And do you think that he will be able to establish any sort of a title to those properties?"

"Look here, Nick, I'm not after knowing what Cracker has got up his sleeve, only that he always does have something there. But whether the title he will show f'r the property is good, 'r not, ye'll be after havin' a hard time to prove that it isn't."

"You say that for a time he and Hawkins were intimate friends."

"As thick as flies."

"Was Moore also one with them?"

"Moore was here before Hawkins came. Moore was dealing faro f'r Cracker whin Hawkins first showed up. That's where they met. I think that Moore was more Cracker's man than he was Hawkins'."

"What sort of a reputation did Moore have up here?"

"Sure he didn't have any at all, at all; he left that behind him where he came from."

"And were the three sort of leaders of that society you mentioned?"

"That's the idea; wid Cracker f'r the gineral-in-chief, wid Hawkins as a sort of second in command, and wid Braxton Moore always handy by to do their dirty work. Where might the two av thim be now, Nick?"

"In prison."

"Faith that's good news. There's siveral av the boys around here who'll be glad to hear that; but by the same token I think I'll not be lettin' on that ye know them at all, at least just for the prisent I won't."

"And that statement of yours, Mike, suggests another question."

"What might that be?"

"Don't you suppose that Cracker is more or less familiar with Boynton's name?"

"Begorra, I haven't a doubt of it."

"And so, if Boynton's name happened to be mentioned in his hearing, he would know at once who he is and why he is here, and all that, wouldn't he?"

"Sure's you're alive."

"Then it behooves us to give him another name."

"It does that. Pat is good enough. Call him Pat Peyton, an old friend av mine; eh?"

"That will do very well."

"Can ye mix a touch av the brogue in with y'r talk, Pat?" asked Mike, turning to him.

"Faith, Mister Cregan, I can do that same if I do be havin' to," replied Boynton, laughing. "Sure me grandmother came from Galway, and me grandfather from Roscommon, an' wanct I wint mesilf as far as the blarney stone."

Cregan threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"It's a peach ye are, Pat," he said. "I smelt the Irish blood av ye the minit I laid eyes on ye, so I did. But ye won't be havin' to use the brogue. I didn't mane that. I only thought it would do no harrm if now an' then ye were to slip in an expression that had the shamrock growin' on it. Ye'll do. I knowed that whin I saw ye with Nick, but now I know it av me own knowledge, which is better when all's said. Now, if ye're ready, we'll go out."

"Where to?" asked Nick.

"We'll walk around to Cracker's and have a drink over his bar."

"Is he open at this time of day?"

"Sure he's always open. He never closes. There's always something doing there, and the man himself seems never to sleep at all, at all. Come on."

CHAPTER III.

THE HOME OF THE GAMBLER.

Gambling-dens are nearly all alike, save in the point of elegance of their furnishings. The resort of the negro, of the sailor, of the penny-a-chip gambler in no-wise differs from the palace frequented by millionaires, save in the furnishings and the attendance upon and the comforts and luxuries provided for the guests.

It was said of Jack Cracker's gilded palace that his was the only place in Nome where one could get a drink without paying for it; but those who made that statement forgot how dearly most of the frequenters of the place did pay for what they had.

Nor was it necessary to rap mysteriously upon a door and then peer through a wicket with a single eye in order to gain admittance to the place. One had only to open the door and to walk inside.

There were two bars—one on either side of the great room, as you entered at the door; beyond that were tables, chairs, settees, couches, secluded corners, and from there you could hear the rattling of the dice at the game of hazard, the whirr of the ball at the roulette-table, the call of the dealer at rouge-et-noir, and, in short, all the noises which go to make up the expected sounds of such a resort.

And Cregan had spoken truly when he said that the place never closed.

It was never without patrons.

In the summer season there is no such thing as night as we understand the word. One never waits for the setting of the sun and the lighting of lamps, in order to go about the pursuit of things that are called nefarious, for the reason that the sun does not set, and the lamps are not lighted.

This statement is somewhat figurative, of course, for there are times when the sun does set, and when lights are quite necessary.

But for the most part, everything in Alaska is done in the light of day, openly.

One only sleeps when one is tired and sleepy, and the green leather-covered doors of Jack Cracker's palace—"The Palace" it is called—were always on the swing; and inside, when one dealer was tired out and had to stop work, another took his place and the game went on just the same.

And here Jack Cracker was omnipresent as well as omnipotent.

He seemed never to tire; never to sleep.

His smooth-shaven, waxen, immobile face, with its sharp features and cold, expressionless eyes, was always in evidence, and his soft, purring voice that was never raised under any sort of excitement, above a certain pitch, could be heard even above the din there, at almost any time when he chose to use it, for the reason that when he did speak it was the habit of others to stop to listen.

He was tall and rather spare in build, but well formed, and as graceful as well as quick as the proverbial cat; and he was always immaculately dressed in black broadcloth with a low-cut vest and a single diamond glittering in his broad expanse of shirt-front; and he always, under all circumstances, wore a crush hat.

When he was strolling about his place and engaging in desultory conversation with this or that patron of his establishment, the hat was apt to be set slightly back on the crown of his head; when he stopped at one of the tables, or when he personally engaged in play—and this he rarely did, save in the game of poker with a select few—the hat was pulled forward so that the brim of it shaded his eyes.

His capacity for drink was phenomenal, and he had never been known to show a sign of it, either in his eyes or his manner.

His face was like a blank wall as far as expression was concerned. He never laughed; he rarely smiled; his words were few, incisive, final.

He was cold to chilliness—he was a gambler.

It was said of him that he did not know what fear was; that he had never been known to raise his voice; that he was never heard to utter an oath; that he was never seen without a cigar in his mouth; that he never slept; that he could shoot a man dead with the same degree of imperturbability that he could bite the end off a cigar; that he never went back on a friend, and that he never forgave an enemy—and that he ran a square game.

And there, in a few words, you have a picture of the man whom Mike Cregan greeted with a "Hello, Jack!" when he entered the place, followed by Nick Carter and Boynton.

"Jack," he added, "I want to introduce you to my friends. "This one, Mr. Carter, is a namesake of the great detective of that name"—this was the result of an inspiration that had just come to Cregan—"and we josh him about it a good deal. You've heard of Nick Carter, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Cracker.

"And this one is an old school friend of mine whom I haven't seen since we were boys together. Pat Peyton's his name. Now shake hands all around. And now, walk up and make your nominations. It's whisky straight for me. What's yours, Jack?"

"The same, thank you. Did you come in on the *Queen* this morning, gentlemen?"

"Yes," replied Nick. "We are sure tenderfeet."

"And you expect to remain with us some time?"

"That is undecided," replied Nick again, still taking the initiative in the replies. "We will doubtless remain a month or so."

"I hope that you will make the 'Palace' your headquarters while you are here. That does not mean that you are expected to play unless you feel like it, you know."

"Thank you; yes; we understand."

Cracker was regarding Nick closely with an expression that as nearly approached a smile as he ever permitted on his face; and after a moment he said:

"It is rather remarkable, Mr. Carter, that you should not only resemble the great detective in name, but also that you should look so much like him in feature."

"Do I?" said Nick. "Did you hear that, Mike?"

"Faith, I did that. I can't say as to the truth av it, for the good reason that I niver saw the gintleman; but I *have* heard that he is good-looking."

"That probably accounts for it," laughed Nick. "Do you know him, Jack?" he added, with that easy familiarity which a man of the world always assumes with the proprietor of such a resort.

"No," admitted Cracker. "I never saw him."

"Then how could it occur to you that I resemble him?"

"It didn't. I was merely putting out a feeler. Having the same name, I thought it possible that you might be the same individual, and that Cregan's statement was merely one of his jokes. He is full of them, you know."

"As an egg is full of meat. True for you, Jack. Faith, Nick, we'll have it announced in the papers that the great and only Nick Carter, from New York, is in town, and is my guest; eh? It wouldn't surprise me if we had a general dusting f'r the hills within a few hours after it."

"Why not?"

"Because there are several hundred spalpeens around here each of whom would think that you were after him, and him only. Maybe Jack would be after lighting out, too."

Again Jack Cracker almost permitted himself to smile.

"I might," he said, "at that; but I don't think as it is, that I will start to-day. Have another, gentlemen."

"What's the matter with sitting down?" asked Mike. "Begorra I'm leg weary. I rode in from me mines ten hours ago, and I have scarcely sat down since. Serve thim drinks over here, Tommy, will you?"

And now Cracker turned his attention to Boynton, fixing his cold eyes upon him with a fixedness that seemed to pierce into his soul, and which would have been impertinent had it not been the only expression that was ever seen in them at all.

"Are you an Irishman, Mr. Peyton?" he inquired.

"My grandparents were Irish, so I suppose I have some claim to the Green Isle," replied the banker.

"Your general appearance is that of an ideal bank president. When you first came through the doorway, I found myself wondering if you had not come here to start another bank," said the gambler quietly.

"Indeed? If I started a bank at all, it would be a faro-bank; but then, I should be in opposition to you."

"I shouldn't mind that at all; but would you know how to run it?"

"Sure thing, Jack."

"Even to the dealing?"

"Even to the dealing—any game in the house.

"Are you in the humor for a duel with me now?"

"A duel? How so?"

"I will give you a table and a new pack. You shall deal one case, and I will play against you—alone. What do you say?"

"Done. It will get my hand in. I confess that I am rusty."

If Cracker's face could have evinced any expression it would doubtless have been chagrin because of this ready answer, for it was plain to Nick Carter that he had expected the banker to decline; gracefully, of course, but nevertheless to decline.

Now, however, it was too late for that, and accordingly the party rose and passed through the rooms to the rear of the building, where there was a table that was not in use.

Nick Carter felt that he was himself surprised.

As well as he had known Boynton, it had never occurred to him that the banker had anything of the sport in his blood; and here he was now ready to match his wit against the most skilful gambler in Alaska.

Cregan looked a little bit nervous, too.

He was wondering if Pat, as he called him, could carry it off as well as he said he could, or if it was largely bluff. For the moment he was sorry that he had brought his friends to that place at just that time.

"There has been nothing said about the limit," he ventured, as the cards were handed to Boynton, and he was tearing the wrapper from them.

"What have you to say about that, Mr. Peyton?" asked the gambler.

Boynton shrugged his shoulders.

"Suit yourself," he said. "I don't know what your regular limit in this house is, but I suppose you will play that, whatever it is."

Again, for an instant, Cracker's cold eyes sought the banker's face; and then, also, with a shrug, he said:

"We hold to a thousand up and down, and double on cases. Will that suit you?"

"Perfectly."

"I think," said Cregan, "that it is hard lines that you bar Nick and me out av the game. I'd like to know what it is that we've done that we're no good in this; eh?"

Boynton turned upon him with a reassuring smile.

"It was Jack's proposition that we try it as a duel," he said. "He wishes to find out if I can deal—and if he is satisfied that I can, he will then size me up for about what I am worth and consider whether it would be policy for him to offer me a job in his place. Am I right, Jack?"

"Partly. I think you could make more money here—if you are a good dealer, than you can by going to the mines."

"Well, we can talk about that later, eh?"

"Yes; after the game," said Cregan. "Are you two fellows going to chatter for the next hour? I want to see that duel, for by the rock o' Cashel, I niver saw the like av wan like it before."

The two men had already taken their seats, and Boynton was now shuffling the cards with a dexterity that made Nick Carter stare.

"The world is full of surprises," he was thinking. "I had no idea that it was in Peyton Boynton to do this thing."

And then the voice of Boynton announced

"Bets down. All ready, Jack."

CHAPTER IV.

THE GAMBLING DUEL—A STRANGE BARGAIN.

Before he pushed the top card from the box Boynton raised his eyes to Cracker's, and asked:

"Did I understand you to say one deal only?"

"Yes."

"And the limit is one thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"Put down your bets."

"One chip at a bet and each chip a thousand," said Cracker, as he reached forward and played behind the card that showed, which happened to be a five, then coppered the ten, jack, queen in one play, and also coppered the high card.

Boynton pushed off the top card, and revealed a jack—to win; he pushed off the jack, and brought into view a five spot—to lose.

"Had me all three ways, didn't you?" remarked Cracker, in his evenly modulated voice; and he reached forward and repeated all three of his bets.

After that there were three turns out of the box before any of the cards on which he had made a bet showed; and then the ten won, and the six lost.

"That's six thousand, Mr. Peyton. You are doing well," remarked the gambler easily. "I'll try you in another quarter this time."

"Very well. Anywhere you please," was the reply.

We need not go into further detail in regard to that game, suffice it to say that it so happened that during the entire deal the gambler picked up only one bet, and when it finally came to an end he rose calmly from the table, crossed the room, disappeared in his office where he could be seen engaged in opening the big iron safe that was there, and presently he returned and threw thirty one-thousand-dollar bills on the table in front of Boynton.

"That ought, pretty nearly, to pay your expenses for awhile," he said, unmoved.

"Oh, I will doubtless lose it back to you again before I am many hours older," replied Boynton. "You can have your revenge any time you want it, you know."

"Thank you. We'll have another try at them, later on. Now, gentlemen, what will you have to drink? I think it is up to me. I was beaten at my own game."

He ordered a bottle of wine, and while they were drinking it, he turned abruptly to the banker and said:

"You made a remark before we began that deal which I have a notion to remind you of."

"What was that?"

"About dealing for me. I don't suppose you would consider a proposition to do it, would you? I am speaking seriously."

Boynton appeared to hesitate; in reality he was thinking deeply, and wondering if such a course would not after all be wise, as affording him an opportunity to know the gambler better, and to learn positively about all the things hinted at by Cregan while they were talking together before they came to the gambling-house.

He did not dare to raise his eyes to Nick's, for he knew that the gambler was watching him narrowly.

Finally, he said:

"If it were not for the fact that I happen to be rather flush just now, I would take you up so quick it would make your head swim."

"What has that got to do with it?" asked the gambler persuasively.

"It has a lot to do with it as a matter of fact. I got a little pile together, down in the States, and thought I would come up here and have a fling. Carter and I have sort of agreed together that if one of us goes into a thing, the other goes in, too."

Nick had risen from the table and, with a significant nod at Cregan, had crossed to the opposite side of the room.

"Holy smoke!" said Mike, as soon as they were out of ear-shot, "you don't suppose that Pat will do it, do you?"

"It's the chance of a lifetime," said Nick, in reply.

"Do ye mane it, Nick?"

"Of course, I mean it. How could he get a better opportunity to find out what he wants to know?"

"Well, as f'r that, there never is much that ye can find out from Cracker, whether y'r next to him 'r away from him, he's that cold-blooded. Look at them now, will ye?"

It was at that instant that Boynton made the remark about having made an agreement with Carter; and as the detective looked toward them in obedience to Mike's suggestion, the gambler beckoned to him.

"Stay where you are, Mike, until I return," said Nick, and he crossed to the table where they were seated.

"Carter," said the gambler, "I want Pat Peyton to deal for me—at least for a time. I haven't made him a proposition in money, yet, because we haven't got down to that."

"Well, what do you want of me?" demanded Nick.

"Peyton says that he is under an agreement with you that if one goes into a thing the other is in, too."

"That's right," said Nick.

"What I want of you is this: What will you take, cash down, to let him out of that agreement for a month with a refusal to renew at the same price when the month is up, provided that Pat wants to do it?"

"Humph!" said Nick, pursing his lips, as if he were considering the matter deeply. "That has the look to me of investing in live stock, doesn't it to you? It looks as if I were bartering and selling my partner; eh?"

"Look at it in whatever manner you please. I am merely offering to buy off your contract with him for a specified time."

Nick wheeled and faced Peyton, and he was particular to put some considerable show of annoyance in his manner as he demanded:

"What have *you* got to say about it, Pat?"

"Not a word, Nick. It is up to you," was the calm reply; for be it said, Boynton was very much "on" to what Nick really wanted him to do, by this time.

"Do you *want* to accept Cracker's proposition?"

"He hasn't made one yet."

"Do you want to be free to consider it when he does make one?"

"If it is all the same to you—yes."

"Confound it all, you didn't come up here to deal faro, did you?"

"I came up here to make money, didn't I?"

"Well, are you going to give up all the ideas we had when we started out?"

"Not at all. I'm merely going to postpone them—if you've got a price."

"A price for what?"

"For me."

"Will you come back to your old proposition after thirty days?"

"Sure—if you hold me to it."

"Do you mean to say that you want to get out of our arrangement altogether?"

"I'll answer that question—at the expiration of the thirty days, if it's all the same to you. That is if we come to any arrangement now."

"You don't know yet what sort of an offer Cracker intends to make you," said Nick, striving to give the impression of suppressed anger to his voice.

"I will give him ten thousand dollars a month, and fifteen per cent. of all the winnings from his deals—I mean the net winnings during each twenty-four hours, of course," said the gambler, with cold precision.

Nick Carter shrugged his shoulders and then spun himself completely around on one heel before he replied; then he said:

"All right, Cracker. If you're willing to cough up another ten thousand for the use of my partner for the thirty days, he's yours. He will stick to his word with me unless I release him."

"Your price is too high, Carter."

"Take it, or leave it. It's up to you, Cracker," said Nick.

"All right, Carter, Pat belongs to me for the next thirty days. Will you have the cash now, or shall I give you house credit for it?"

"The house credit will do me; and I'll tell you right now, Cracker, I can beat Pat Peyton nine times out of ten when he deals."

"All right. If that is the case, I'll bar you from his table; that's all."

"You can't do that."

"I will do it. We will make that a part of our agreement. You are not to play at his table when he deals. Take it, or leave it."

"Oh! Very well. Let her go."

Then Nick turned to Boynton again.

"I hope you are satisfied now, Pat."

"Look here, Nick, there is no use in your getting huffy about this thing. I ought to make a nice pile out of this arrangement. The salary won't be in it with my percentage of the winnings."

"I suppose not."

"And you are ten thousand to the good by the arrangement. I think you ought to be satisfied."

"Have you heard me say that I am not?"

"No. Now look here. You can be on the lookout around, just the same as if our partnership continued without interruption; and——"

"I'll have to think about that, Pat."

"Gentlemen," said Cracker, interrupting, "a bargain is a bargain. We have made one. I do not myself see the necessity of further argument,"

"Very well," said Nick. "It is settled."

He was turning away when the gambler called to him.

"Wait a moment," he said. "Where are you gentlemen stopping? At the Lights?"

"No," said Nick. "At Cregan's. He has asked us to stay at his house."

The gambler turned again to Boynton.

"I can give you a very comfortable room here," he said, "but not as pleasant a one as you probably have

with Mike. You can stay with him, or you can stay here, just as you please."

"Which would you advise?" asked Boynton. "Mike and I are old friends, you know. I don't want to offend him; but all the same——"

"I would advise that you do both," said the gambler.

"How is that? How do you mean?"

"I mean that you can use the room here whenever you please, and that it would be as well for you to keep your room with Mike at the same time. Then, if you want to take a day off to rest up after a long siege at dealing, you have his place to go to. It might happen, you know, that you would be kept here in this room sometimes for thirty-six or even forty-eight hours at a stretch. If that should happen, you would want a quiet place in which to rest up."

"That is true, Jack."

"It might be a good idea to consult Mike on that point," suggested Nick, as coldly as the gambler himself could have spoken.

"That's a fact, Nick," said Boynton. "Call him over."

Mike was called and the situation was explained to him; and he was shrewd enough to see through it all at once.

"Sure, Pat," he said, "I wouldn't f'r a minute hear av y'r livin' anywhere but with me while y'r in the county and I have a room to me name 'r a roof over me head; so that's settled."

"And when will you begin, Pat?" asked the gambler. "In just twenty-four hours from this minute, if that's agreeable to you," was the instant response. "I want that long to look around me and see what's what. Don't forget that I have just landed from the steamer."

"Very good, then. At three o'clock to-morrow. Let it go at that. Let's shake hands all around, and have another bottle on me. You have made me spend fifty thousand dollars since you entered the place—but I am satisfied with the investment."

CHAPTER V.

GUNS MUST BE LEFT AT THE BAR.

When the three friends left the gambling-house, Mike conducted them around the town, stopping here and there to introduce his visitors to people they encountered, and entering first one place and another, so it was almost three hours before they were again snugly settled in the Irishman's house.

And during those three hours not a word was said in reference to the incident that had happened at The Palace.

But when they were once inside of Mike's house; when the reserve was thrown off, and there was no longer any possibility that their confidences might be overheard or commented upon, the mask was thrown off, and Mike dropped into a chair and stuck out his feet with the remark:

"Well, now, may I ask you, what do ye think of that?"

Boynton burst into hilarious laughter, Mike scowled, and Nick looked solemn.

After a moment, as nobody replied, Mike repeated his question word for word, and added:

"And if it's all the same to ye, gintlemen, I'd like to hear the opinion av the house on the subject. Mr. Nicholas Carter, av New York, has the flure."

"I don't know what to think of it," said Nick gloomily.

"Why not?" asked Boynton.

"That fellow Cracker is a deep one."

"Sure, he is that same," said Mike.

"And," continued the detective, "it is my private opinion that he came mighty near to guessing who we were when we went in there, and what we were here for, too."

"Ye don't mane that, surely," said Mike.

"I do mean it, Mike. Don't you remember what he said about my looking like the detective as well as having the same name?"

"Faith, that was only a bit av a bait that he trun out to ye, Nick."

"That may be true, but somehow I don't think it is. I believe he suspects."

"I mind me now, Nick, that he also spoke av Pat, here, as being an ideal bank president."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Boynton. "No doubt he has heard my first name from Hawkins. It struck him as familiar when I was introduced as Mr. Peyton. He put the two together. His remarks at that time were only the result of his natural shrewdness and caution. It is his business to be both shrewd and cautious."

"That is all right," said Nick. "All the same that fellow is about as deep as they make them, and he would not stop at any lengths to carry a point that he had made up his mind to carry."

"True f'r you, Nick," muttered Cregan.

"All the same," continued the detective, "I think it is decidedly a good move for Peyton to go there as a dealer."

"Call him Pat, Nick. If ye don't do it all the while ye'll be after forgittin' it whin ye want it most—and that's no drame."

"You are right, Mike."

Then the detective turned to Boynton.

"Pat," he said, and he smiled broadly when he said it, "I had no idea that you were so handy with the cards."

Boynton laughed with good nature.

"I am what you might call a natural card-sharp," he replied. "That is to say, the manipulation of a pack of cards comes to me as naturally as a duck takes to water. There is nothing that I cannot do with them. I can

stock a deck of cards as easily and as well as Cracker himself, and I have no doubt that I can beat him at it."

"He probably caught onto that fact when he saw you deal."

"To be sure he did."

"You didn't 'fix' that faro deal on him, did you?"

"How could I under the circumstances? No; that was pure luck."

"But he understood your abilities by the manner in which you handled the cards."

"Certainly. I purposely made it plain to him."

"Did you have this idea in view at that time?"

"I never once thought of it; but I did want to make him think that I am what you might call a gentleman gambler."

"He thought it all right, bedad!" said Mike. "Begorra, you should have stood where I did, and watched him. I've heard people say that there niver is a soul of an expression in Jack Cracker's eyes, but I'll deny that hereafter. They're not like any other eyes that I iver saw, they're that cold; but by the powers they can change from gimlets into augers and from augers back again to gimlets about as aisy as ye pl'ase; and it's divil a bit ye can rade from thim at that!"

Suddenly, Nick began to laugh, and his companions looked toward him in surprise.

"What's the matter with ye, Nick?" asked the Irishman.

"It just occurred to me to wonder what Pat's directors would say if one of them should happen to come up here and stroll into Cracker's place to take a flier; eh? The president of a Wall Street bank dealing faro in a gambling-house in Nome."

Boynton shrugged his shoulders.

"Needs must when the devil drives," he said placidly.

"What do you expect to make by it, anyhow, Pat?" asked Cregan.

"I wish I knew what, Mike. I am only taking a long chance on top of what you have told us about the properties that really belong to me, to find out just where I stand. You advised keeping still for awhile yourself, didn't you?"

"I did that."

"Well, it struck me that a good place in which to do the keeping still would be right close to the source of supplies—supplies of information, I mean."

"It isn't at all a bad idea."

"And while I am doing the 'keep-still' act over there at the Palace, you and Nick can go around and look as wise as snakes, and pick up all the information you can find on the outside."

"Oh," said Nick, "I heartily approve of the whole scheme. Mike will tell you that I said that when we crossed the room together, and left you talking with Cracker. That isn't the part of the affair that worries me."

"What worries you, then?"

"It worries me, wondering how much that gambler knows, how much he suspects, and just what he is figuring on doing with you when he gets you into his clutches."

"Into his clutches? I'm not in his clutches, and I don't propose to be, either."

"You will be—after three o'clock to-morrow."

"Not on your life!"

"He will get the best of you, somehow."

"That he will not, Nick. Don't you fool yourself. I know just as much about his game as he does himself, and I think I can give him cards and spades at it, at that."

"You are a surprise-party to me, all right."

"I'll be a surprise-party to him before I am through with him, and don't you forget it. I didn't come up here on a vacation. I came to save half a million dollars that I have already invested in this country, and I propose to save it, too, if there is any way to do it."

"That's the way to talk, all right!"

"And it's the way to act, too. If it hadn't been for Mike, we might have fooled around here for months before we had gotten onto the right track, and in the meantime, Jack Cracker would have been onto our game and would have taken his own measures accordingly. As it is, I don't believe that he even suspects who we are."

"I do," said Nick decidedly. "I think he more than suspects. I think he knows."

"Then what is his game in asking me to deal for him?"

"That is impossible to say. I wish I did know."

"I'll tell ye what," interrupted Cregan. "If Nick is right, and Cracker does know who ye are, 'r if he even suspects strongly enough to give him a dacent idea, it's as sure as shootin', Pat, that y'r runnin' inty danger the minute ye take up with him. He's a long-headed cuss, as wily as an Indian and as cruel as fate itself. If he's onto you, ye'd better give up y'r job av dealing while yet there is a chance, f'r if he can't get the best av ye in any other way, sure he'll be after making an excuse to shoot ye; 'r he'll pretend that ye've robbed him, 'r he'll put up some kind of a game on ye."

"I shall be on my guard. I am not afraid of him."

"Well, if I were you I wouldn't slape in that room av his at all, at all. Sure ye can come here to the house at any hour ye pl'ase; it's all wan to me, so it is."

"I think as Mike does," said the detective. "You cannot be too cautious, and you had better make up your mind to sleep here whenever you have a chance to rest."

"I suppose I will have twelve hours on and twelve off as a rule, won't I?" said Boynton.

"Not by a domned sight, ye won't!" vociferated Cregan. "That ain't the way they run their gambling-dens up here. When there is high play, there ye are till it's over, if it takes a murtherin' wake."

"Well, I shall stand for my contract, whatever happens."

"And that reminds me," said Nick, laughing aloud at the thought, "that I have got a house credit down at Cracker's for a cool ten thousand."

"He expects to win that back from you all right," remarked Boynton.

"Perhaps he will, and then again perhaps he won't. I know something about cards myself, old man."

"I know that; but nobody has a chance against a dealer at faro."

"I shall decline faro. I will play only poker, with Cracker himself."

Cregan burst into a roar of laughter.

"Sure!" he cried at last, wiping his eyes, "it's the funniest thing that iver happened in the worrld, this business. Here we are, the three av us, figuring on b'ating the keenest and shrewdest gambler in the Klondike to a standstill. We go into his place to-day and pull out forty thousand dollars altogether; eh? And now ye're talking about sittin' in with him at a game of poker, and doin' him at that. Faith, ye make me smile, so ye do!"

Nick was on the point of replying when the door opened and Jack Cracker walked deliberately into the room.

"I hope I don't intrude, Cregan," he said, in his usual purring tones. "That Chink of yours was outside and he told me to walk right in."

"And right he was at that, too, Jack. Begorra, 'tis the first time ye ever honored me house with y'r prisince. What'll ye have?"

"A little of the same, Mike; thank you," was the reply; and then the gambler announced the purpose of his visit.

"I was wondering, Pat," he said to Boynton, "if I could not persuade you to begin work a little sooner than the time fixed, and then take a day off later to make up for it."

"Why, yes, I suppose so, if you think it is necessary."

"Oh, it isn't necessary; but it would be a favor."

"Then I'll do it, of course."

"I thought you would. That is why I came directly up here as soon as I knew about it."

"About what?"

"There is an outfit just blew into town from the North not an hour ago. They will be down on me tooth and nail in about three hours; after they get cleaned up and in shape. It will be big play and steady play, and I would like to put you up against them. Will you do it?"

"Certainly."

"What outfit is it?" asked Mike, from across the room.

"The Clarendons," replied Cracker, raising his cold eyes to Mike's.

"The Clarendons, is it? Sure, didn't ye say the last time they shot y'r place up that ye'd niver allow wan av thim inside y'r dures again, Jack?"

"I did, but I have changed my mind. I just gave them permission to come on condition that they would leave their guns at the bar when they come in."

"And sure ye know mighty well they won't do it."

"I know this at least, Mike. If there is any shooting to be done on this visit, I'll be in the game myself."

CHAPTER VI.

A DELIBERATE PLOT TO KILL.

Boynton—or, Peyton, as we must call him now—having agreed to report at The Palace within an hour, the gambler took his leave, silently, as he came.

The moment he was out of the house and Mike was satisfied that he had gone, he turned to Nick with a growl like an angry bear, and said:

"Now, I wonder how long that divil stood there at the dure and listened to what we were sayin' together."

"Probably not at all," replied Nick. "I think he walked directly into the room. He might have overheard the last remark of yours when you were talking about my being able to beat him at a game of poker. That would do no harm if he heard that."

"Well, maybe so; maybe you are right. Anyhow, that ain't what's botherin' me now."

"What is bothering you, Mike?"

"Thim Clarendons."

"What about them?"

"They're the wildest divils in all the north country."

"What of that?"

"They come into town with dust to burn. They probably own the richest claims ye iver heard tell of. All they have to do is to go up there where it is and spend a little while diggin' it out. Then they come down here and blow in the whole lot of it."

"Well?"

"There's four av thim. They stick together like plasters. They all get b'ilin' drunk, and then, sure, they go crazy, and whin they do that there ain't nothin' livin' can stop thim. The last time they was here they pretty nearly wrecked The Palace, four men were killed somehow—though nobody ever did know who killed them—and whin they wint away, sure Cracker swore that he'd niver have them inside his place again; so he did."

"What of that?"

"Faith! ain't he after lettin' them in this day?"

"That is his privilege if he wants to take the chances."

"It isn't that I'm thinking about."

"What, then?"

"Sure it's Pat that's both'rin' me."

"What's the matter with Pat?"

"There is nothin' the matter with Pat—just now; but if he ain't a cold corpus before he's twenty-four hours older, sure he'll be playin' in better luck than he did a little while ago."

"Do you mean that you fear that one of the Clarendons will shoot him because he is to deal for them?"

"No, I don't."

"What do you fear?"

"I think that Jack Cracker will shoot him, while the mêlée is goin' on, and that afterward nobody will know who did it."

"Oho! That's the game, eh?"

"That is what it looks like to me, Nick."

"What do you think about it, Boynton?" asked Nick.

"I think that I came up here to take chances, and that I'm not going to dodge them. And I think that I took that job down at The Palace in pursuit of a certain purpose, and that I am not going to abandon it; and I think that forewarned is forearmed, and that I will be on the lookout for any little move that Cracker might undertake to make. But all the same, I also think that Mike is wrong."

"Maybe so, maybe so," said Mike.

Boynton left them a few moments later to go to The Palace, and as he was taking his departure, Nick said to him:

"We will follow you down after a little. Mike and I will be there while the game is going on; and if there should be any gun-play, we will be there to see it."

"All right, Nick. I'm not in the least alarmed."

"Boynton, I never would have dreamed that you had so much sand," said the detective admiringly.

"A fellow doesn't have much chance to show it in the counting-room of a bank," was the reply.

After he had gone, the detective turned to Mike again.

"Tell me something about these Clarendons," he said.

"There ain't much to tell only what I have already said. There's four av thim. Bob, and Phil, and Tom, and Cal, and sure ye can't tell wan from another, they're that much alike."

"Are they what you would call bad men?"

"Not a bit of it; only whin they're drunk. They're as quiet as lambs any other time."

"And they come to town just to have a time. Is that it?"

"That's it."

"Do you think there is sure to be shooting when they are around?"

"They have niver failed yet. Ye see, Nick, Cracker knows that for sure. If he *is* onto who y'r friend Boynton is, and what he is here for, there couldn't be a better chance for him to get rid of him and no questions asked, than in this very way."

"I understand."

"To have the Clarendons come into his place, to give them all the whisky they want, and finally to have somebody start the ball a-rollin'."

"Exactly."

"Who's to hinder Cracker, then, from standin' quietly behind his bar and drawin' a bead on Pat, as if he were at a turkey-shoot and Pat was the turkey?"

"I think," replied Nick quietly, "that in this particular case I am here to hinder that very thing."

"God bless ye, Nick! So am I, and I'm dommed if I wance thought of it till this minute."

"I haven't the least idea of permitting Jack Cracker to shoot my friend, and I'll tell you right now, if the Clarendons do start any sort of row or gun-play, I'll put them out of business before they have gone very far."

"Sure ye will, Nick. Faith, I do be forgetting myself all the while. I forgot what a dead shot ye are with thim little pistols ye carry up y'r slaves. Have ye thim there now?"

"Look!" replied Nick; and he threw down his arms with a sudden jerk, whereupon it seemed as if a revolver had materialized in each hand. Then he released them, and they disappeared again, in the sleeves of his coat.

"'Tis a purty sight to see!" said Cregan. "I wonder could ye tache me that trick."

"Hardly," replied Nick. "It took me all the years of my youth to learn it."

"And I remember me well, Nick, that whin I left New York, ye could hit a pin-head with the bullets, as far off as ye could see it. Can ye do that yet?"

"I think so."

"Then I'm not going to be after worryin' any more at all. Now, what the divil——"

Mike got upon his feet and went to the window, where he stood looking out.

"What is the matter?" asked Nick.

"Sure, it's Siwash Pete that is outside, and I'm wonderin' what the divil he do be wantin' here now. Wait; I'll have him inside. He wouldn't come here for nothing. He's a quare fish is that same Siwash. I saved his life wance, whin he was 'most dead, and sure he'd give it up f'r me any time that I asked it now."

The Irishman passed out into the hall and to the front door, where he called to Peter, and a moment later led him into the room.

"What's 'atin' ye, Pete?" asked Cregan, as soon as the door was closed.

The Indian did not reply at once. Instead he stood silently regarding the tall Irishman, and now and then casting a furtive glance toward the detective.

"Out with it, Siwash!" commanded Mike. "Sure this gintleman is me friend from way back, and y'r safe to spake before him as ye are in front av meself."

"It's Cracker," said the Siwash, in much better English than he had used earlier in the day, for Nick pre-

ently discovered that he could speak it very well if he cared to do so.

"It's Cracker, is it? Jack Cracker, the gambler, eh?"

"Ye'."

"What about him, Pete?"

"He kill. He talk with Black Kate, down by the fire-house. They meet there. Siwash inside and hear them. Much talk. Much kill."

Mike looked over at Nick with an expression that said as plainly as words:

"I told you so."

Then he addressed the Siwash again:

"Who is he going to kill?"

"Man name Pat. Him dealer—new man. Him come in ship to-day with this man here."

"And how is it going to be done, Siwash?"

"Black Kate. She do it."

"But how?"

"Black Kate, she git Pinkey Bill an' Big Mose. They go to Palace. Bimeby they start row. The Clarendons, they in town. They there at The Palace. When row starts, they shoot. Then Big Mose and Pinkey, they shoot, too."

"Well, go on."

"Then Black Kate, she sneak behind bar. She find knife there; knife belong Bob Clarendon. She throw the knife. You know how."

"Sure, I know how! Haven't I seen her do it time and time again? Tell you what, Nick Carter, Black Kate can throw a knife as straight as you can shoot a pistol, and that's sayin' a good deal."

"Who is she?" asked Nick.

"That's hard to say. She's half French and half Indian. She came here from Canada. Her skin is rather dark, and so she is called Black Kate. She's a handsome woman, for all that."

He turned to the Indian again.

"How much does she get for the job, Pete?" he asked.

"Three thousand dolla' for herself; one thousand dolla' for each of Pinkey and Mose."

"You are dead sure about all this, are you?"

"Ye'. Me hear it all. I inside fire-house. They talk just outside."

"When was that?"

"Jes' now. Me come here right away."

"Did they say what time the thing was to be carried off?"

"No. When Clarendons git drunk. Soon after that. When place is full."

"And Black Kate is going to use Bob Clarendon's knife, is she? I wonder what that is for?"

"Jes' so's nobody, and 'specially this man here, suspect Cracker have anything to do with it."

"Oho! So he is afraid of Nick Carter, after all, is he?"

"Ye'. Him say that name."

"He did, eh? What did he say about him?"

"Say detective—from York. Bad man. Want him out the way, too. Do that job later. Black Kate git ten thousand for that job."

"But just now it is Mr. Peyton who is to be done for, eh?"

"Ye'. Him you call Pat. New dealer. Him have right to mines, or something. Don't know what. But Cracker, him want him outen way."

"Siwash, you have done well. I thank you," said Mike, and he extended his hand to the Indian, who accepted it solemnly, but with every outward show of pleasure and pride that an Indian could have manifested.

"May I not make him some substantial present?" asked Nick.

"What! For bringing us that news? No, sirree! Siwash doesn't take pay for a service of that kind, do you Pete?"

"No. Me do it for Misser Cregan. That's all. Me go now."

And he stalked solemnly from the room.

CHAPTER VII.

A HUMAN TIGRESS IN HER DEN.

During a full minute after the departure of the Indian, Nick Carter and Mike Cregan sat silently in their chairs, staring at each other.

It was Cregan who spoke first. He said:

"Well, now, Nick, what do you think of *that?*"

"I think," replied the detective slowly, "that it is the very best thing that could have happened."

Cregan stared harder than ever. Then he left his chair, crossed the room to Nick Carter's side, and placing his right hand under the detective's chin, lifted his head until they were staring into each other's eyes.

"Nick," he said deliberately, "there are times when I'm dommed if I don't suspect that ye're gettin' nutty! What's 'atin' ye, anyhow? And how in the divil's name could a fiendish plot like that wan be the best thing that could have happened, I'd like to know?"

The detective laughed.

"Mike," he replied, "you know me of old. You know that one of my favorite methods of procedure is to force the other fellow to show his hand. Isn't that what we have accomplished in this case?"

"Faith, if he shows his dirty paw by killin' our friend Pat—who's as dacent a chap as I have run onto in a long time—it'll be a bad day f'r the likes av Jack Cracker!"

"So it will. But I have no idea of permitting Boynton to be killed."

"Who's Boynton, I'd like to know?"

"Well, Pat, then."

"Stick to y'r text, Nick, although there sure ain't much use in doin' it now, since the blackguard av a gambler knows mighty well who he is. You were right about that, Nick. He was outo the game from the very first; and didn't he play his own part like a birrd?"

"He certainly did."

"Now, what are ye goin' to do to prevint that murderin' haythen from carryin' out his plot to kill?"

"I don't exactly know, Mike; but I think the first thing to do is to round up that Black Kate outfit—Black Kate, Pinkey Bill, and Big Mose; eh? There are three euphonious names for you!"

"Maybe they are; I dunno about that, not bein' on familiar terms with the worrd; but if it manes anything that's cussed mane and dirty and cowardly and thievish and bad, it's thim all right. But I want to tell ye right now, Nick, it won't be as aisy as ye think to round up that woman. She's a holy terror if ever there was wan, and she ain't afraid av man 'r divil, 'r both av thim together."

"Do you know where she lives?"

"I sure do."

"Do you think she would be likely to be at home now?"

"I'm thinkin' that she would be; and Pinkey and Mose would be with her, gittin' ready for the murder av Pat."

"Then I will ask you to walk down the street with me and to point out her house. I think I will make a call on her."

"Faith, I'll go with ye, although it's more than the reputation of a man is worth to be seen goin' into her place!"

"I don't want you with me, Mike. I will make this little call alone."

"And git a knife chucked through y'r vitals f'r y'r pains. I'm hanged if ye will!"

"Mike, you know me of old. I'm going to Black Kate's house to see her, alone. You can wait outside somewhere, or down the street, or in a near-by saloon. I won't be long."

"Sure, Nick, I'd like to have had ye under me charge when ye were a slip av a boy; I'd ha' made ye mind f'r wance in y'r life. But, all right; come on. I know ye'll end by havin' y'r way, all right, and we might just as well lave out the argument in the first place. It won't be long now before the Clarendons will be at The Palace, fillin' up with the booze and otherwise gittin' ready f'r what is goin' to happen, whatever that may be. Come on."

After a short walk, Cregan pointed out a building that stood some distance back from the street, or road, and at a considerable distance from any of its neighbors.

"There ye are," he said. "That's where she lives. Now go ahead, and jvin ye come out, ye will find me waitin' f'r ye at Flynn's, around the corner. Ye know the place. We were in there a few hours ago."

"Yes; I know."

The detective left his friend and walked deliberately to Black Kate's house and rapped on the door.

It was thrown wide ajar almost instantly, and a tall, handsome, dark-skinned woman stood on the threshold, facing him. Her hands rested on her hips and her head was thrown back in an attitude of defiance as she faced the detective with a smile that was half a sneer on her face, and a bold, dauntless expression in her fiery black eyes.

"I don't know you," she said, before Nick could utter a word. "What do you want here?"

"I want to have five minutes' talk with you, if you please," replied the detective, smiling upon her with every appearance of good nature.

"And what do you want to talk with me about?" she demanded.

"There is something that I want done, here in Nome, and my friend Mike Cregan has told me that you are just the one to do it—if there is money enough in it to suit you."

The woman eyed the detective suspiciously for a moment, as if in doubt what to do; but then, with a toss of her head, she took a step backward, thus leaving the passage free for him, and she said:

"Come in, then."

Nick stepped inside the house and closed the door after him; and as he did so he was conscious of the fact that a man who had been listening to what was said at the door had hastily withdrawn into a rear room—and he had no doubt that both Pinkey Bill and Big Mose were there.

Kate did not offer him a chair, but she stood facing him as she again demanded to know what he wanted.

"There are two men in that back room," said the detective coolly. "I want to talk with you alone. Send them away for a moment and I will tell you what I want."

"Maybe I prefer to have them where they are," she retorted.

"In that case you will lose a chance to turn an honest penny," said Nick.

"Get out, Bill! And you, too, Mose!" she called out, without turning her head. "Come back in twenty minutes. I'll tell you all about it then, whether this tenderfoot wants me to, or not. How does that suit you?" she added, addressing the detective.

"Perfectly. I should have requested you to tell them, anyhow. I merely don't care to talk with you where they can hear me."

"Get out, boys!" she called again; and after a moment there was a sound of stealthy treading across the floor and the noise made by a door closing gently.

But the detective was not deceived.

Before Kate knew what he was doing he had stepped past her and into the adjoining room.

Both men were seated there, neither having left the room as Kate had directed them to do.

"Your friends don't seem to obey you very well," said Nick, smiling at her, and pretending not to see the heavy frown that had gathered on her face. Both of the men had leaped to their feet and each had made a move as if to draw a weapon. But Nick Carter looked them calmly in the eyes, and they dropped their hands to their sides again. There was something in the aspect of this man who faced them that cowed them at once.

For just one moment there was a tableau; and then the two men turned and slunk from the room through a back door and disappeared.

There was a half smile on Black Kate's face when the detective turned to her again, and reentered the front room.

"Did you bring all that monumental gall up here with you, or have you found it since you arrived in the country?" she asked.

"Oh, I have always had it, Kate."

"Well, you've got a nerve, all right. Now, what do you want with me?"

"I want to know how much you will take in cash—tomorrow morning—to miss your aim to-night when you are supposed to throw Bob Clarendon's knife between the ribs of the new dealer at The Palace," replied Nick, coolly.

For an instant Black Kate stood like a statue, staring at him with eyes that fairly blazed. Then, with the quickness of a cat and with a muttered curse, she raised her right hand to the back of her neck, and suddenly launched it forward again.

Nick Carter saw the motion, and knew perfectly well what it meant.

As she threw her hand forward, he stepped quickly to one side, so that the gleaming knife she threw at him grazed his shoulder and buried itself a half-inch or more in the woodwork of the door behind where he was standing; and it remained there, vibrating and quivering like an angry thing that had been foiled in its purpose.

"If you can come as close as that without actually hitting the dealer," he said coolly, "you will do exactly what I want done."

Black Kate glared at the detective in amazement not unmixed with admiration. Then she laughed boldly.

"Say, tenderfoot," she said, then, "you're a peach!"

"Thank you," replied Nick. "I believe that Cracker is to give you two thousand dollars for hitting the mark; I will make it five, if you miss."

"Where in thunder did you get all your information?" she demanded, again amazed.

"A little bird brought it to me, down the Yukon."

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"I am called Nick Carter."

"A detective?"

"No; a tenderfoot, just at present."

"Bosh! Who told you so much about Cracker's plans for to-night? Tell me that!"

"I have already told you; a little bird. Oh, yes! There is another thing that I wished to tell you. We will have to find some method of discounting that ten thousand you were to get when you and Pinkey and Mose should put me out of the reckoning."

"Sit down, Nick Carter," she said. "You're too smart for me. I reckon I'll sell out."

"I thought you would."

"Do I understand that you wish me to go there, just the same?"

"Yes."

"And to go behind the bar at just the right moment, get Bob Clarendon's knife, and throw it at your friend, according to directions—*and miss?*"

"That is precisely the idea. I could not have stated it more closely myself," replied the detective.

"Well, you are a tenderfoot, after all, ain't you?"

"Why?"

"Don't you know that Jack Cracker would send a bullet through my heart in less than two seconds afterward? Don't you understand that he knows that *I can't* miss?"

"You missed just now, didn't you?"

"Jack Cracker didn't see that, did he?"

"No."

"Well, he wouldn't believe it if you should tell him about it. I'll take your five thousand and I won't kill Pat Peyton, as you call him, but I won't go to the saloon and *miss*. Not for ten thousand."

"Why? Because it would ruin your reputation as a knife-thrower?"

"No; because Cracker would kill me the next instant. He would know that I have sold out. You can fool lots of people, Nick Carter, but you can't fool Jack Cracker, not a little bit!"

"How will you make it, then, without arousing the suspicions of the gambler?" asked Nick.

"Oh, I'll find a way to make it. You be there when I get to The Palace, and I'll put you wise then."

"All right. Only understand one thing, Kate."

"What's that?"

"I don't want any funny business about this. I can shoot quicker and straighter than Jack Cracker, and if you, and Pinkey, and Mose go back on me, there will be three funerals from this house right away."

CHAPTER VIII.

PLOTTING AGAINST THE PLOTTERS.

Black Kate's fierce eyes narrowed into slits when Nick Carter made the threat against her, and for a moment she stood as rigid as a rock; then her features relaxed and she smiled.

"I like you," she said, then.

"Thank you," replied Nick.

"You've got sand. I like sand. You are the first man who ever dared to threaten me to my face. Even Jack Cracker wouldn't dare that."

The detective did not deem it necessary to reply to this statement. Instead he took a large roll of bills from his pocket, and having peeled off five one-thousand-dollar treasury-notes from it, he extended them toward Kate.

"I am willing to pay in advance," he said. "Take it."

"What about Bill and Mose?" she demanded, as she accepted the money.

"Nothing at all. They needn't know. You miss your aim, that is all."

"Oh; you are still sticking to that part of it, are you?"

"Yes."

"And what about Jack Cracker and his little gun—and me?"

"I will see to it that his little gun and you are so wide apart that you will be in no danger."

"Can you do it?"

"If I had any doubt of it, I would not ask you to do the thing. You are not afraid, are you?"

"I am afraid of Jack Cracker's gun."

"I will take care of the gun—and you, too, Kate. And now there is another little matter that I want to ask you about."

"What! Another?"

"Yes. If you should find that the small sum of twenty-five thousand dollars had been slipped under your door some fine morning, what would you do with it?"

"Gee!" said Kate. "You must want the whole bunch over there put out of business for that sum."

"I don't want anybody put out of business; but if you will listen to me, I will tell you a little story—and I think that you are just the one to profit by it."

"Fire away, Nick. I'm listening."

"Once upon a time there was a man came to Nome whose name was Jacob Hawkins——"

Kate started violently, but Nick Carter continued calmly:

"——and he brought along with him a small pot of money which belonged to a man in New York by the name of Boynton. It was Hawkins' place to invest that money in good mining properties in the names of himself and his friend. Hawkins fell in with Jack Cracker, and the two became very intimate, so that Hawkins finally went to live at Cracker's establishment. In the meantime another chap by the name of Braxton Moore, an Englishman, appeared on the scene. Now, this man Hawkins remained here about two years. During that time he picked up some valuable properties with the money he had brought here with him, and then he discovered that Braxton Moore was the son of an English earl, and he conceived the idea of floating a great corporation in England, and of making thereby many millions of dollars. Are you following this story, Kate?"

"Betcher life! Go on."

"He did not know that Moore had been disowned by his own people and had left his home in disgrace. Hawkins was all right at that time, and meant to play on the square with his friend in New York; but in the meantime Jack Cracker and Braxton Moore had hatched up a scheme to get his properties away from him.

"They got Hawkins to going wrong, and as he was one of those natures which could never do things by halves, he went the whole length of the tether, and finally became as bad as the worst of them around here.

"And he was worse off than the others were, too, for Cracker betrayed him on the quiet, all the time posing as his friend; with the result that the time came when Hawkins had to skip the country mighty quick and quiet, or have his neck stretched.

"He knew, too, that he was going back broke, save for the properties he left behind him up here, and so he fixed up a scheme to rob his friend in New York the moment he returned there, his intention being to go on to England with Moore, interest Moore's father in the mines, and ultimately pay back to his friend in New York the money he had robbed him of.

"It was Cracker who hatched up this scheme. It was Cracker who sent Moore to New York with Hawkins. It was Cracker who conceived the whole fiendish plot, all the time making Hawkins believe that he was his friend and that he was working in his interests as a friend.

"To carry out their schemes the better, they pretended to quarrel; but that amounted to nothing at all. Are you on, Kate?"

"Go on, confound you!"

"He did not care to carry his papers and documents to New York with him, so he left them in charge of his very good friend, Jack Cracker—and he went away."

"Well?" demanded Kate breathlessly.

"When Hawkins got to New York, he ran up against it rather hard, with the result that he is now in prison—and Moore is with him; also four others whom Cracker sent to the States to keep tabs on them and report to him."

"Do you mean to tell me that the whole bunch is behind the bars?" demanded the woman.

"Just that. But I haven't finished my story."

"Go on, then."

"Back in Nome there was a woman known as Black Kate, who had long been on terms of intimacy with Cracker. She had also given her aid to the schemes against Hawkins. She was, and is, afraid of nothing, *and she is out for the dust every time.*"

"Right you are, honey!"

"She knew all about this plotting business from the very start. She helped to carry it along, and when the brains of the others who were connected in it were not equal to the emergencies that arose, her own subtle brain helped them out."

"You're a dream, you are!" was Kate's admiring comment, just here.

"Well, my story is almost finished. All those papers which prove that those properties rightfully belong to Hawkins and Boynton are now somewhere in the custody of Jack Cracker, and Black Kate knows exactly where they are, and how to place her hands on them."

"You're wrong there, old man. I know where they are, all right, but placing my hands onto them is quite another matter."

"Where are they?"

"They are in a big safe that Cracker keeps in what he calls his private office, up-stairs over the back end of The Palace; but it would take about six pounds of dynamite to blow that safe open, and nobody but Cracker himself knows what the combination is."

"Well, the end of my story is this: If the woman, Black Kate, can manage somehow to get her claws onto those papers and deliver them to me, she gets twenty-five thousand dollars in exchange for them—and she gets five more right now for using her best efforts in that direction, whether she ever gets the papers or not."

And here Nick Carter produced the roll again and added another five thousand to what he had already given her.

"Say, Nick," said the woman, after a pause, during which she glanced alternately at the money in her hand and at the man who had given it to her, "I wish you would decide to stay up here in Nome."

"Why so?"

"I'd like to tie up with you. We could win the world. Gee! I thought Jack Cracker was about the coolest and slickest proposition I ever heard of, but you can give him a mile and three-quarters and beat him in two."

"What do you think about my suggestion, Kate?"

"I'll tell you that after we are through with the business over at The Palace."

"You want to see first how that is going to turn out, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, I'll give you a hunch right now concerning that little affair."

"All right. What is it?"

"There will be something doing when that business comes off to-night, and I have a faint suspicion that Jack Cracker will be down and out for a little while—just long enough to enable a certain woman of my acquaintance to conduct me to the room where that safe is, and for her to stand by and keep watch while I open it."

"Humph!"

"She will earn the twenty-five in that way, just the same as if she opened it herself and brought the papers to me; see?"

"Oh, I see all right; but you take my breath away. How the dev——"

"Eh?"

"How in the world do you suppose that you can put Jack Cracker down and out long enough for us to carry off any scheme like that?"

"I'll find a way to do it."

"You don't mean to kill him, do you?"

"Certainly not."

"Because I wouldn't stand for that."

"I will promise you that he will not even be hurt so but what he will be around all serene inside of twenty-four hours."

"Look here, if you think you can get a drug down him, you're barking up the wrong tree. He has had that little game tried on him before now, and those who tried it are—dead. You needn't think that I'm going to bait any hooks of that sort."

"I don't. I told you that I would look out for him. I only want you to be handy by to help me out with the rest of it—and when we go to the room where the safe is that contains the papers, we'll just take him along with us for safe-keeping."

Black Kate's eyes were staring now.

"Remember, it is twenty-five thousand in your pocket, Kate; and don't forget that we are not robbing him, either. We are just taking what belongs to us for the moment, for we propose to return it to the rightful owner."

"And that is the new dealer over at The Palace, isn't it? His right name is Boynton, isn't it? Peyton Boynton; eh?"

"Yes," said Nick.

"Oh, I was 'on' in a minute. You came mighty near to fooling Cracker, and you would have done it if it hadn't been for me. But I had heard Hawkins use Boynton's first name so often that when I heard that this fellow's name was Pat Peyton, I caught on right then and there. But Jack says that he can deal the cards all right."

"So he can. But don't let us get off our trolleys. Are you going to work for that twenty-five, or are you going from here to The Palace to give the whole thing away to Jack?"

"Suppose I should say that I was going to do that, what would you do about it?"

Nick laughed in her face; and then he replied:

"I'd fool you!"

"How?"

For reply the detective deliberately removed a small phial from one of his pockets, and holding that together with his handkerchief in one hand he stretched forth the other.

"Put out your two hands," he said, "and I will show you."

She saw that he was half joking, and she complied; and the instant her wrists were within reach, Nick seized them with his right hand, and held them.

"Now, Kate," he observed very quietly, "you are a powerful woman—much stronger than most men; but if you will try to get away, you will discover that I hold you so that you cannot possibly free your hands. This little bottle contains chloroform. In two minutes, no matter how you might struggle, I could have you unconscious, at my feet. Out in the river there is a steamer which is to sail for the south in twelve hours. If I thought that you would betray me, you would wake up to find that you were a passenger on that steamer, and that you were far out at sea." He released her suddenly, and, stepping back, demanded:

"How is it, Kate? Do we work together?"

"You bet your sweet life we do!" was the instant reply.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CLARENDONS START THE ROW.

It was nine o'clock in the evening when Nick Carter and Mike Cregan entered The Palace together, and the detective could barely repress a smile when through the vista of the long room he beheld Peyton Boynton seated at one of the faro-tables in his shirt-sleeves, busily engaged in manipulating the cards for a throng of men who were grouped at the opposite side of the layout.

Beside him in a high chair, the seat of the watcher over the game, sat Jack Cracker, narrowly watching every play that was made, and every check that was paid out or swept back into the hands of the dealer to be restored to the pile.

Seated directly opposite Boynton, and very evidently interested in the game, was Black Kate, who had apparently forgotten every incident of that eventful day.

"The Clarendons haven't begun to play yet," said Mike, in his ear, as they crossed toward the bar, only one of which was in operation to-night. "There they are at that table there, drinkin'. Sure they're fillin' up to late the hand, gittin' ready f'r the fun that's comin'. There'll be something doing here presently, Nick."

"I haven't a doubt of it."

Possibly it was true what had been said of Cracker—that he had eyes in the back of his head, for he knew at once without turning around that Nick and Cregan had entered the place.

After a moment, he called one of his dealers who was not engaged to the chair he occupied, and then he left the table and strolled over to where our two friends were standing.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said. And then to Cregan he added:

"Did you ever see anything more quiet and lamblike than our friends the Clarendons are to-night?"

"Sure, it's the calm before the storm, I'm thinkin'," replied the Irishman. "Did ye insist upon that bit av a condition about the guns, Jack?"

"Certainly. Their guns are all behind the bar—and their knives, too, as for that."

"Are they handy by? Sure it wouldn't be much av a stunt f'r a feller to lape over the bar if he happened to be eager f'r a gun."

"There won't be any leaping over the bar in this place to-night. You can bank on that."

"I hope not; but all the same I'll bet ye a hundred that ye have trouble here before the night is over."

"With the Clarendons?"

"Sure."

"You're on, Mike."

"Begorra, it'll be like findin' it, so it will. Whist, now! They're gittin' unaisy. That's Bob, ain't it, who just got up?"

"Yes."

"Faith, they look so much alike that I never can tell wan from another of thim. He's heading for Pat's table, too. I wonder why the others don't go with him."

"They always begin that way," replied Cracker. "One at a time. It will be Phil next; then Tom; and then Cal."

"Are they pretty drunk, Jack?"

"No; no more than usual. I have given them warning, though, and they have promised to be good."

"Have they much dough with them?"

"About a hundred thousand between the four. They have already deposited that with me to draw against if they lose."

"They always do lose, don't they?"

"Nearly always. The trouble with them is that they always stick at it until they are flat broke. Many times they have been way ahead of me—but they always quit losers. They wouldn't be satisfied any other way."

"It's a quare lot they are, sure. I think they're nutty, mesilf."

That cold ghost of a smile appeared for an instant on the face of the gambler, and then he replied:

"Not at all. It is only their method of enjoying themselves. Some men buy yachts; others go into race-horses; and there are a thousand ways of spending money

foolishly. The Clarendons happen to enjoy this method better than the others; that is all."

"Watch Bob Clarendon now," said Mike. "He has crowded his way close beside Kate, and Smoky Palliser has gotten up to give him his seat."

"Smoky was holding it for him," said the gambler. "Shall we move over nearer the table and watch him?"

"No," replied Nick. "I think I will remain here where I am."

The gambler turned his cold eyes upon the detective for an instant, and then deliberately asked:

"Why?"

"I am afraid that my presence there might disconcert your new dealer," replied Nick; "and, besides, you forget that you forbade me his table."

"I will withdraw the objection, if you like."

"Oh, no. I shall not play to-night. Some other time, Jack."

The gambler shrugged his shoulders and moved away just as the second one of the Clarendons left the table where they were drinking, and strode unsteadily toward the faro layout.

"There goes number two," said Mike. "Things will be gittin' interesting before long."

"I wonder why Kate has planted herself there at that table?" asked Nick.

"Sure, she's always there whenever she has a dollar in her clothes," said the Irishman; "but if she made the bargain with you that ye told me about, she'll not be forgettin' it. Kate loses her temper mighty aisy, but I have niver known her to lose her head."

"Mike?"

"Yes."

"We have each of us got to have about four pairs of eyes in our heads to-night."

"Sure it's of that that I'm thinkin' this minute, Nick."

"I believe that I can rely upon Kate."

"So do I after what ye told me about y'r confab at her house."

"And therefore we need not watch her."

"Well, it wouldn't do any harm, I'm thinking, all the same."

"And it won't do for us to remain right here in this one spot all the evening."

"That's true f'r ye, all right."

"We must move around a little, and we must not keep together all the while."

"Well, what are ye drivin' at, Nick?"

"I want you to keep your eyes on the Clarendons for the present; and also take a look now and then at Bill and Mose. I shall devote all my energies to Jack Cracker."

"There go Tom and Cal Clarendon, together, toward the table," said Mike. "It's funny to see the way the other players make room for them, ain't it, now?"

"It is interesting," admitted the detective. "Cracker is coming this way again. You might move away a little, Mike, and give me a chance at him alone."

"All right. I'll go and play a stack on the wheel. Sure me palms are itchin' to try it. I have the fever in me veins, all right, if I iver permitted it to manifest itself."

He moved away, and in another moment Nick and the gambler were again face to face, both wary, both suspicious, and both outwardly the same as the first moment they had met.

"Will you take something, Mr. Carter?" asked the gambler.

"Thank you. How is the game going, Jack? How do you like your new dealer?"

"He's a corker. They can't beat him. Even Black Kate has a scowl an inch deep in her forehead."

"I see that all the Clarendons are at the table now."

"Yes; and in a few minutes they will ask me to raise the limit for them."

"Do you do that?"

"Never. That is what they always get mad about."

"I should think they would understand your rules by this time."

"A drunken man never understands anything right, Carter. Hello! what's up now?"

Bob Clarendon had pushed his chair back from the table and brought his fist down upon it with a force that jarred every chip that was there; but he immediately pulled the chair back again into position and said something to the dealer, which must have been in the nature of an apology, for they shook hands across the table and the deal proceeded.

"That is the beginning of the end," was Nick Carter's thought, and the gambler said:

"He always does that way when he loses a bet that he felt sure of winning, I could tell you without going near the table that some card has won out or lost out, and that he has played it the other way for the fourth turn. It is one of his favorite plays, and when it goes against him it always makes him mad. Won't you sit down, Carter? Here are two chairs."

The detective accepted the proffered seat, and they had been seated thus only a moment when Black Kate abruptly left her seat and approached them.

"Lend me a thousand dollars, Jack," she said. "That new dealer of yours is the toughest proposition I ever stacked up against."

"What! broke already, Kate?" asked Cracker.

"I only had a thousand, and he's got that," she said angrily.

"Well, don't you think you have played enough for the present? Sit down here with us and have a glass of wine; and let me introduce you to Mr. Carter, of New York."

She nodded at Nick and dropped into a seat beside him.

"I have heard of a detective who answers to that name in New York," she said, without looking at him.

"There is one, I believe," replied Nick.

"Aren't you the man?"

"I am only a tenderfoot at the present moment," he replied.

"You'll get your eye-teeth cut if you stay here long enough," she announced, sipping at her wine, but keeping her eyes steadily upon the faro-table that she had just left; and then abruptly she turned to the gambler again.

"You're a fool, Jack," she said.

Cracker shrugged his shoulders.

"You should have known better than to let those Clarendons play here to-night. Didn't you notice what Bob did just now?" she persisted.

"Yes. He apologized, didn't he?"

"What of that? It won't be long before he will be doing the same thing and forgetting to apologize. And then the other three will get started, and then there will be the usual gun play. You see!"

"Nonsense! Their guns are behind the bar."

"Rats! Behind the bar nothing! They have each given you one gun, I suppose, but you can bet your sweet life that they've got one or two apiece in their pockets at this minute."

"Do you really think so, Kate?"

She laughed aloud, boldly.

"Sure I think so. I'd bet a whole stack of blues on it. I'll tell you one thing."

"What is that?"

"When the ball opens, it's me for behind the bar, Jackie. I'm not looking for any lead pills to-night." Then wheeling suddenly she added: "Mr. Carter, can you shoot?"

"A little. Why?"

"I was going to suggest that when the fun begins you might find it handy to follow me to the shelter of the bar. Jack had the thing made so that bullets wouldn't go through it. It's real handy to have something like that to get behind when there are bullets flying around—and if you're a tenderfoot, you might be nervous."

Jack Cracker almost scowled; and then he almost smiled; but instantly he leaped to his feet, for at that moment one of the Clarendons—not Bob this time—sprang to his feet, and, with a curse that could be heard the entire length of the room, swept every chip that was on the table to the floor, and then stood over the whole with a big revolver in each hand, glaring fiercely around him.

And his three brothers also started up, each with a weapon in his hand.

It looked as if the critical moment had come.

CHAPTER X.

THE GUN-FIGHT IN THE PALACE.

Events which begin just as that one did happen very rapidly, and it is almost impossible to describe them so that an adequate idea can be conveyed.

There were half a dozen or more things that happened within the space of the next two seconds—for there was no appreciable hiatus between the first act of the drama—the one when the first of the Clarendons started to his feet—and the second one when the actual shooting began.

Black Kate was on her feet almost as soon as Clarendon was, and she made two leaps for the bar and vaulted it like a colt, disappearing behind it almost instantly.

Jack Cracker also started away, but not with such precipitate haste, although he did not by any means move slowly.

He passed around the end of the bar, and then remained there, leaning idly upon it with his gun in his hand ready for instant use if it should be required.

Nick Carter remained exactly where he was, and, notwithstanding the excitement around the faro-table, he never once took his eyes from Jack Cracker—and Jack Cracker found time to shift his own glance toward Nick and discovered that he was being watched.

Peyton Boynton sat quietly where he was, never moving a muscle, for he knew that if he did so one of the Clarendons would shoot him dead on the spot. He realized that the only way in which to save his own life just then was to keep perfectly still—and wait.

It was a hard thing to do, and a trying thing to accomplish and endure, but he did it.

The other players at the table, whose chips had been swept to the floor, sprang away from the layout in a rage, and each and every one of them pulled guns.

Mike Cregan, at the opposite end of the room, slipped along the wall rapidly toward Nick, but stopped halfway to him, and, pistol in hand, waited.

And all of these things thus far described happened while you might have counted one, two, three. In a word, they happened as nearly simultaneously as can be conceived.

And then the shooting began.

One of the players, who was particularly enraged because his chips had been scattered on the floor, let drive at Cal Clarenden and winged him—and he got a bullet between his own eyes in return, so that he never had occasion after that to regret the loss of his chips.

Another player shot Bob Clarendon through the shoulder, and received in return a bullet through his own heart.

Then Tom Clarendon pitched forward on his face, and fired his own gun as he fell, "getting" the man who had put him out—for Tom Clarendon was "out" that time, forever.

Phil Clarendon, seeing that each of his three brothers were out of business, and realizing that one of them had been killed, sprang back a little way from the crowd around him and then did the act which is called "fanning" a gun; that is, he used one hand on the hammer while he held the trigger back with the other.

The result was that every chamber in his weapon was emptied faster than you could count, and every bullet that flew from it found a mark somewhere.

In the very midst of this mêlée, Peyton Boynton, seeing an opportunity to escape, started to his feet and attempted to dodge backward out of harm's way, for he was as yet untouched; but at the very instant he made that move something whizzed through the air, and a shining, gleaming knife hissed like a streak of lightning across the room toward him—and cut a gash in the flesh of the inside of his left arm.

It hung there in his shirt-sleeve, too, and he pulled it out as he leaped away out of immediate danger.

He had no idea where it came from, or whose knife it was, for he had not been told of the project of slaying him, and how it had been avoided by Nick Carter.

And Black Kate, when she threw the knife, dodged under the bar again, out of sight, while Nick Carter, never moving, kept his eyes fixed upon Jack Cracker at the end of the bar.

All this, you must understand, happened in an instant—while one, two, three might be counted.

Nick Carter saw Kate throw the knife, and for an instant held his breath.

That was the only instant when he took his eyes away from the gambler at the end of the bar; but he did watch the flight of the knife, and he breathed with relief when he saw the result of it.

Instantly his eyes were back again upon the gambler.

He saw Cracker start angrily.

He saw him glance furtively around him.

He saw him raise his own weapon, as if he were taking deliberate aim—and then Nick Carter's two hands shot out, his two revolvers were discharged at the same instant, and the pistol in the hand of the gambler flew into the air, knocked away by one of Nick's bullets, while the gambler himself sank to the floor behind his own bar.

In two leaps Nick was beside him.

Kate was already there, for she had seen him fall, and now she threw herself forward, as if to protect him from farther harm; but Nick caught her and held her up while he said rapidly:

"He isn't hurt. He is only stunned. Open that door low behind the bar and help me to take him out of here. Quick!"

She complied, half dazed.

So much had happened, and so quickly, that even Black Kate, accustomed to such scenes as she was, scarcely knew what she was doing.

Only Mike Cregan in all that roomful saw what was happening behind the bar. Only he knew that Jack Cracker was for once in his life down and out, and that he had been carried bodily out of the room.

But Mike kept to his post.

It was his business now to protect Boynton, and Boynton was already at his side.

"Come," said Mike; and he seized him and dragged him down behind the bar, from whence, after a moment, they also made their way through the small, low door under the back bar, through which Nick and Kate had taken the proprietor.

Inside the gambling-room the fight was still going on, although it was now almost over.

Such things happen with great rapidity, and are apt to be over and past so quickly as to be appalling when one considers the execution that is done while they last.

"It's up to us to get away, me laddie buck!" said the Irishman to Boynton, as soon as they had passed through the small door and found themselves in the hallway which ran along one side of the building. "It'll be just as well f'r us, I'm thinkin', to know as little about that affair as possible."

"But where is Nick?" demanded Boynton, halting stubbornly.

"Nick's all right. Don't you worry about him at all at all, Pat. Sure, he'll be after comin' along prisintly with a loidy on his arm, as they say on the Bowery, in me own dear old town."

"Where is he? I want to know. Is he back there in that room?"

"Nit, me lad, he ain't."

"Then where is he?"

"Come along with me, acushla, and sure I'll tell ye all about it when I have ye and me own silf in a place av safety. Faith, now, do ye be thinkin' that I'd l'ave the spot if I didn't know that Nick Carter was all right? Tell me that."

"No; certainly not."

"Then come along wid ye and stop y'r blab."

"Where are we going?"

"Home, no less; that is, provided we can git out av the back dure and skip away without bein' seen. Don't ye know that the committee will be down on the hull bunch av thim in another brace av shakes? And sorra a bit av me wants it to be known that I was in the mix-up all the time. Now will ye be good?"

Thus abjured, Boynton consented to be led away.

He was without his coat and hat, and he still held the knife in his hand, which he now remembered for the first time.

"Look!" he said; and he held it up for Mike's inspection. They had just reached the rear door of the building and were about to pass outside.

"Faith, I know whose it is without lookin'," replied

Mike. "Ye'd better kape it as a souvenir, Pat. It'll serve to remind ye av this scrap whin y'r back in God's country."

"Whose is it, then?"

"Hold y'r whist, will ye? Git behind me—so. Now, whin I start, you duck and run, and folly me; see?"

The Irishman did not wait for further words, but with a quick bound he leaped from the doorway and ran, Boynton after him, until they were well out of sight and sound of the rumpus that was still going on at The Palace.

And so they reached his own house, entered it, and closed the door behind them.

"Ye'll be wantin' a coat, I'm thinkin'," said Mike, as soon as they had recovered their breathing. "Wan av mine will overcome ye a trifle, but ye'd better have wan on. Here; try this wan. Sure, it fits ye like a glove."

"Yes; like a glove that's about three sizes too large," retorted Boynton.

"That's what I meant, only I didn't have the bad manners to say so."

"I want you to tell me where Nick Carter is, Mike."

"He's attendin' strictly to business, and he gave me orders direct that nather you nor I was to bother him. Sure, he's after y'r papers, if ye want to know."

"My papers?"

"That same. He found out where they were, and he's gone after them. He started just before we did—him and that handsome woman that was sittin' forninst ye at the faro layout."

"Black Kate!"

"Bless me soul! If ye don't know her name already. "Sure, it's makin' eyes at ye she must have been doin' to make ye inquire about her."

"No," replied Boynton; "but she gave me warning of what was going to happen."

"She did that? Begorra, she's better than I thought her. What did she say about it?"

"When she came to the table, she passed around behind me before I saw her, and then she leaned over and whispered in my ear:

"'There'll be some shooting going on before the play is over, and when it begins, take my advice and sit as still as a statue. In that way you'll not be hurt. If you move, you'll be killed.'

"Then she passed on around the table, bought her stack of chips, and she barely looked at me after that. But I heard the players around me refer to her as Black Kate."

"It was good advice she gave ye, Pat."

"So I discovered. What became of her? Was she injured?"

"Didn't I tell ye she was with Nick?"

"Oh!"

"The two av thim are after thim papers; and now, Pat, if y'r rested, I think we might as well stroll down toward The Palace and find out how many was kilt."

"There are three that I know about," replied Boynton.

"Yes; and that'll be about all. There'll be a lot av thim with wounds, but there won't be many that's dead. It always is a surprise to me, when this promiscuous shootin' takes place, that only a comparative few are kilt—and usually they are the wans ye kin jest as well get along without havin' around botherin' ye. Are ye ready?"

"Yes."

"Come on, then. The marshal and the head av the committee will be wantin' to ax ye some questions, an' I'll tell ye now that ye want to say that ye don't know a blessed thing about it at all at all, except that ye ducked and ran f'r it. If ye are asked who fired the first shot, swear that ye don't know. Tell 'em you was that scared that ye were paralyzed, and whin ye woke up and came to, sure ye were at my house talkin' with me all peaceable."

"All right, Mike. Thank you."

"Faith, I'm thinkin' now that thim Clarendons have shot up this town f'r the last time."

And with that sage remark the Irishman led the way out of the house and in the direction of Jack Cracker's Palace.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GAMBLER BROUGHT TO BAY.

When the detective bore the unconscious form of the gambler through the little door from behind the bar into the hallway, Kate followed close behind him; and as soon as they were through it she turned and closed the door.

"Quick now, Kate!" said Nick. "Where is that room you call the private office?"

"There! Up there at the top of those stairs," she replied huskily.

Nick did not turn his head to look at her. If he had done so he would have discovered that she held in her hand, ready for instant use, a knife that was the mate to the one she had thrown so dexterously at Boynton.

He would have discovered, moreover, that her eyes were blazing and that her fingers were twitching nervously, and that several times while he was carrying the senseless form of the gambler up the stairs, she raised her arm to strike—and that each time she let it fall again, only to raise it once more.

Probably Nick Carter was never in his life nearer to death, without knowing it, than he was during those few seconds it required for them to climb the steep stairs to the top.

But he was entirely unconscious of this.

He did not even guess it until they were inside the room with the door closed and locked behind them.

Then, as Nick deposited his burden upon a leather-covered couch that was there, and was straightening his back again, he felt the prick of the point of the weapon just under his shoulder-blade, and he heard the voice of Black Kate breathing over him huskily, as she said:

"Nick Carter, if Jack is dead, all bets are off! Prove that he is not, or as sure as I'm pressing the point of this blade against your back, I'll drive it through your heart!"

The detective was amazed, but he had the good sense not to move.

"Look for yourself, Kate," he replied. "I told you over there at your own house that I am a good shot. This was one of my favorite snap shots. I just grazed him over the temple, and stunned him, that's all. He'll be as lively as a cricket—and as mad as a hornet; too—in half an hour's time. Look for yourself, Kate."

He took his own handkerchief then and carefully wiped away the few drops of blood that came from the wound, and she saw that he had spoken the truth.

With a sigh of relief she concealed the weapon she carried; and then she laughed.

"Not that I care so very much," she said, "for I both fear and hate him; but when all is said Jack has been good to me. I wouldn't kill him, and I wouldn't be responsible for having him killed, either."

"He is very far from being a dead man now," replied Nick, while he produced two pairs of handcuffs, and having snapped one pair around Cracker's ankles, he drew the gambler's hands behind him and fastened his wrists in the same manner.

That done, and having made Cracker as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, he turned again to the woman.

"I don't suppose that you care to have him know that you are in this thing with me, do you, Kate?" he asked.

"Not for a thousand worlds! I wouldn't give that for my life, twenty-four hours later, if he even suspected such a thing," she replied.

"That being the case," continued the detective, "I will move the couch out toward the middle of the room—so. Now, yonder, back of the couch, are some heavy drapery curtains over that door—— By the way, what is in that room, there?"

"Nothing. Nobody."

"Well, you can conceal yourself behind those curtains and witness all that takes place, if you want to escape being seen; but I want to tell you right now that you are not to interfere with me, no matter what happens. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"You keep your hands off, and when I get the papers, you get your money that I promised you; see?"

"Yes. But how are you going to get at the papers?"

"I'm going to make Jack Cracker tell me how to do that."

"You'll never do it. *He* will never do it! No power on earth could make him do that!"

"You watch, and see; and you had best get a move on you, too, for he's coming around."

She lost no time in complying with this last suggestion, and the next second had concealed herself behind the curtains, from where she could watch the proceedings without being herself seen.

Nick Carter pulled a chair forward until it was directly in front of the unconscious man on the couch, and then he seated himself to await the moment for the test.

And after ten minutes more of waiting Jack Cracker slowly opened his eyes.

For a moment or two he did not seem to comprehend his surroundings at all.

His eyes sought the detective's face, and then wandered somewhat aimlessly around the room, resting, as they traveled from place to place, upon the pictures on the walls, on the big safe that almost filled one side of the room, and on other familiar objects; and then they returned to Nick Carter again.

"Are you feeling better?" asked Nick calmly.

Cracker made some unintelligible reply, and then sought to raise his hands to his head; but only to discover that they were shackled together.

Next he moved his feet, and with the same result; and then he made a grimace which must have been intended for a smile.

"What happened?" he asked.

"You fainted," replied Nick.

"That's a lie, Carter, and you know it."

"Very well, then, I shot you, if you like that better."

"Where? Am I badly wounded? I don't feel it anywhere, only my head aches."

"You are not much hurt. I only stunned you at the same time I shot your pistol out of your hand. You will remember, perhaps, that you were just going to shoot your new dealer——"

"Oh, yes; I do remember now. Kate missed him, and I——"

"You thought you could finish the job while there was an opportunity."

"You are a good guesser, Carter. I wish I had Black Kate here."

"Do you? Why?"

"I'd put her out of business for good. She ought not

to have made a miss of that business. I'd bet a thousand to a cent that she did it purposely."

"I think you'd lose, Jack. Anyhow, she tried the same act on me, and failed. She missed me, too."

"You will never make me believe that."

"You don't have to believe it."

"And by missing she got me into this pickle."

"Possibly. You can get out of it without much trouble, as soon as you are inclined to do so."

"How?"

"By telling me how to open that safe."

"I'll see you roasted first. Is that what you've got me trussed up like this for?"

"Yes. There are some papers in that safe that I want."

"You'll have to keep on wanting them, then. You will never get them through any aid of mine," was the cool retort.

To all appearance, Jack Cracker was as self-contained as ever he had been. He did not seem to be in the least chagrined by his surroundings, and the fact that he was held a prisoner in his own room by Nick Carter.

"I don't suppose that hot irons would pull the information from you, would they?" asked the detective smilingly.

"Nit."

"Or red-hot pincers; eh?"

"Not on your life!"

"Or thumb-screw or any of those pleasant little instruments we read about; eh?"

"Nothing would force me to tell you that combination."

"Jack, I think I know of one thing that will do it without the least trouble."

"Then you're a corker."

"Shall I tell you what it is?"

"I'm in no hurry. I'm quite comfortable, thank you," was the ironical reply.

"Do you remember that when I first appeared in your place down-stairs you knew me at once, and that you were fool enough to let me know that you did?"

"Yes; I remember that. It was a foolish move on my part."

"Jack, if you hadn't made that break, you might have stood a chance of winning out; but I knew at once that if you knew me, I *ought* to know you."

"Well?"

"You have changed mightily, Jack, since I saw you; but all the same I know you."

For the first time since Nick Carter had been in Nome, Jack Cracker winced.

"I reckon you're barking up the wrong tree, Carter," he said coldly.

"Oh, no, I'm not. As I just said, you have changed mightily, but all the same I know you—and I know of quite a number of people who would be glad to renew acquaintance with you."

"If you think, Carter, that any bluff like that is going to work with me, you are mightily mistaken."

"Look here, Jack; listen to me."

"Well, I'm listening."

"There is a small town back East—quite a small town it is—where they remember you very well indeed, and it wouldn't take them long to send up here and get you if only they were aware of the fact that you are alive, and was not drowned, as they now suppose, in the Hudson River while you were attempting to cross it in the night. I think yours was the only escape that was successful from the room with the 'little door,' wasn't it?"

"Curse you, Carter!"

"You have got some emotions left, after all, haven't you?"

"And I suppose you mean to give me away, now that you have found me, don't you?"

"I mean to take you away—unless you come to my terms. I mean to take you from here to the marshal, and ask him to hold you until I can send back to the State of New York for the necessary papers, and when they arrive I mean to take you back there with me, and to place you once more inside that little room from whence you will take your last walk to the——"

"Don't, Nick; don't!"

"So! you are coming around, are you?"

"You've got me where I can't help myself."

"You are dead right there, Jack. You perceive, do you not, that I have not mentioned that other name of yours which would mean so much in New York? You don't want me to mention it, do you?"

"No, I don't!"

"And in consideration of the fact that I do not mention it, and also that I forget that I have seen you, you will give me the combination to that safe, won't you?"

"By Heaven, Carter, if my hands were loose——"

"But they are not loose; neither are your feet. And they will never be loose again, either, unless you come to

my terms. Understand, I want nothing whatever from that safe, only those papers which will establish Boynton's title to his properties—only, of course, your own signature afterward to a little document which will forever debar you or your friends from making any claim to any of the titles. But those I *will* have, *or you go to New York State and to the electric chair.*"

There was a gasp of dismay from behind the curtains back of the couch, and like lightning Cracker turned his head and discovered Black Kate standing there, only half concealed.

"So," he said coldly, "I have you to thank for this, Kate; eh? All right, my girl. I will settle with you afterward—after I have settled with Nick Carter."

He turned back to the detective again, as coolly as ever he had been, and said:

"All right, Carter. You win. I'll give you the combination, the papers, and the signature. After that, I go free."

CHAPTER XII.

THE PAPERS IN THE SAFE.

"I think, Jack," said the detective slowly, "that there is one more condition that I will have to make with you."

"What! Another?"

"Yes."

"Well, out with it. What is it?"

"I think I will have to ask you to promise me that you will leave Black Kate alone."

"Oh, I'll promise you readily enough. Go ahead. I'll promise you anything you ask if only you'll get this thing over with and set me free."

"Which means that you will not keep your promise after you make it."

"You can put any meaning to it you like. It is all the same to me."

"Very well, Jack. What is the combination?"

"Four—eleven—twenty-three—thirty-six. Now open the safe, curse you!"

"First," said Nick, "before I do that, I will have a private word with Kate. Step out into the hall, Kate, and wait for me. I'll be there in a moment."

He followed her out presently, and pulled the door half shut behind him. Then he said to her:

"Kate, Jack will kill you now, if he gets half a chance."

"I know that only too well," she replied; "that is, if I don't kill him first."

"Will you take a bit of advice from me?"

"Yes."

"Go quietly down the stairs and out at the back door. Avoid seeing anybody if you can; and when you are out of the building go straight to the home of Mike Cregan and tell him that I want him to conceal you there until I arrive."

"What good will that do?"

"We will send you away on the first ship that goes south."

"I wouldn't go."

"Would you rather stay here and be killed than go south and live?"

"Oh, I don't know. I wish somebody had killed you before you came to Nome."

"I haven't a doubt of that; but, you see, they didn't do it, and so we must face what we are up against to the best of our abilities. I know Jack Cracker of old. I know just what he is and what he is capable of doing, and I know that your life will not be safe for a moment after I have once set him free."

"Neither will yours, for that matter. He will try to 'do' you before you get out of Alaska, and you can bet your life on that!"

"I don't doubt it; but I am better able to cope with him than you are; and, besides, I think I know a way to protect myself from him, and his friends as well. Come! take my advice and go up to Mike's and wait there for me. I will be there in the course of an hour or two, I think."

"All right," she said. "I'll do it."

"And when you get there you can tell Mike all that has happened."

"Are you going to let him loose as soon as you have finished about those papers?" she asked, jerking her thumb toward the room they had left.

"Yes; that is according to agreement."

"All right," she said, again. "I will wait for you at Mike's."

She turned then and went down the stairs, while the detective reentered the room.

"Well," said the gambler, with a sneer, "I suppose you and Kate have fixed it all up how she is to escape from me; eh?"

"We have tried to fix it up; yes."

The detective turned his back on the gambler then and applied himself to the task of opening the safe.

But it responded readily to the combination that had been furnished him, and after a little he pulled the doors open and stood back.

"There is a whole lot of money in that safe, Carter," said the gambler. "I don't suppose you want any of that, do you?"

"No; not a penny."

"I owe you ten thousand dollars, don't I?"

"You may consider that off, too."

"Generous, aren't you?" he sneered again. "Generous enough when you are taking property from me that is worth millions."

"It never belonged to you."

"Well, I had got into the habit of thinking that it belonged to me. That is pretty much the same thing."

"Is it as valuable as you say, Jack?" asked Nick.

"It is the finest property in Alaska—and the richest."

"Thank you. I am glad to hear that. Boynton will be pleased, too. Now, where are the papers?"

"In that drawer under the smaller cash-box. They are in a bundle tied with red tape. You are welcome to them; but I want you to assure me again that you will not betray me, Carter."

"I never go back on my promises, if you do," replied the detective. "You are still dead, as the people at Sing Sing believe you to be, so far as I am concerned. Now keep quiet while I go through these papers."

The detective seated himself at the table, and one by one he examined every paper in the package, relieved to find that they were all there, and that there was no question whatever as to Boynton's title to the properties, save in the few instances where claims had been jumped and afterward transferred to Cracker; and these he intended to cover entirely by a deed from Cracker to Boynton.

"You have blank claim-deeds, of course?" he asked Cracker, when he had finished reading.

"Yes; in the desk."

The detective found one of them, and filled it out to his satisfaction.

That done, he released the gambler's hands, and, picking him up in his arms, seated him in a chair at the desk.

"I will witness it myself, after you have signed it," he said. "And in the morning I will ask you to go with me before a commissioner and swear to it. Is that all right?"

"Yes. I'll stand by what I have done, if you will stand by what you say."

"You know I will do that."

"Then come around when you get ready and I'll go with you before a commissioner. *There!* Are you satisfied now?"

"Perfectly."

"Then will you be so good as to take these irons off my ankles?"

Without a word Nick unlocked the irons and returned them to his own pockets.

"There you are," he said. "And now, Jack, I've got a warning to give you."

"Fire away. Gee! but my head is sore!"

"It won't do you any good to try to kill me, or either of my friends, while I am in this part of the country, for I shall arrange that if anything should happen to me, through you, the State of New York will send up here for you just the same."

"All right. I know something about your methods, Carter. I'll fight shy of you the rest of the time you are among us. There isn't any warning about that."

"No; but there is about what I am going to say now."

"Say it, then."

"If you seek to take any vengeance against Black Kate while I am in the country, I will get after you myself. If you kill her, I will kill you! Is that sufficiently plain?"

"Quite so."

"Good night, Jack."

"Good night, Carter."

Nick took the papers under his arm and walked quietly down the stairs and out of the building at the front door, thoroughly satisfied with his night's work.

Immediately in front of the building he encountered Cregan and Boynton, and there was a hearty handshaking all around.

"I have the papers—all of them," he announced. "The whole thing is settled. You know now, don't you, Mike, why I said it was the best thing that could have happened when Siwash Pete told us about the plot to murder Boynton?"

"Sure I know it. I didn't quite see it at the time, and I thought ye was nutty; but faith, Nick, it's a long head ye have. Did ye hurt the Cracker much?"

"I think I hurt his feelings more than anything else."

"He'll git over that, so he will."

"Have either of you seen anything of Black Kate?" asked the detective, as they were turning away to return to Mike's house.

"Not a sign of her, Nick; why?" asked Boynton.

And then the detective told them all that had taken place in the room upstairs, and how Kate had agreed to go to Cregan's house and wait for him there.

But when they arrived at the house she was not there, and Nick, greatly perturbed about her, left them and sought for her at her own home.

He found Pinkey Bill and Big Mose there in possession, and they told him surlily enough that Kate had gone, and that she did not intend to return.

"She left this for you, if you should show up here," said Mose sulkily; and he gave a sealed envelope to the detective.

Breaking the seal, Nick read:

"I'm going to skip out, Mr. Carter. There's a whaler down the river, and I know the captain. He'll be glad to have me with him for awhile, and by and by he will put me ashore at 'Frisco, where I am quite at home. You needn't worry about me, for I shall never return here. As for the money you promised to pay me, I haven't time to wait for it. I'll write to you at New York later, if I need it, and you can send it to me when I ask for it. Jack Cracker and I cannot live in the same country any longer. He would kill me, or I would kill him, so it is best for me to take this chance and skip. Good-by.

KATE LE FEVRE."

And so Nick Carter returned to the home of Mike Cregan, greatly relieved in every way, for if Cracker had killed Kate, he would have felt that he was himself in a measure responsible for it.

THE END.

The next issue of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, No. 497, will contain "The Black Flag of Piracy; or, Nick Carter's Daring Venture."

ABOUT THE EARLY NUMBERS OF THE

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WE receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 300 are entirely out of print. We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 160 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays." We give herewith a complete list of all stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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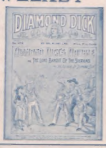
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